

BEAR PAW

By DANE COOLIDGE

Thrilling combats and romance abound in this drama of the cattle country by one of America's best-loved Western writers. Dane Coolidge once said he gathered his material by "sitting around the fire with his mouth shut," listening, while other men talked. And here is a tale which proves his acknowledged ability to write from real life—a novel replete with all the flavor of the fireside legend of the exciting American West. . . .

Old "Bear Paw," a powerful ranch owner, has aroused the animosity of the other cattlemen in the Mexican border country by refusing to allow them to run their herds into his property for watering. Bitterest of his adversaries is Grif Lockhart, black-hearted and evil. His second wife is the beautiful but unhappy Salome, uneasily concerned about the fate of the first Mrs. Lockhart. Hope comes for Salome, however, in the person of the young and dashing American, Mark Tamubull, once a member of Pancho Villa's army.

In the swift procession of events, typical of Coolidge Westerns, a spectacular rustler's battle provides the thrilling climax.

BEAR PAW

By W. C. TUTTLE

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Chapter I

Wheley Bare sat out on his lookout point and surveyed Animas Valley like a king. As far as he could see the cattle were drifting in to the wells that gave him control of the range—then back in long lines to the thickets of mesquite-trees along the upper edge of the Sink.

He gazed down on it serenely, with his rifle across his knees, watching the endless procession of whirlwinds as they came twisting down
through Lost Pass—the souls of the unburied dead from the battlefields
of Old Mexico. Many were being killed there and, after death, their
spirits wandered north to escape from that unhappy land. Or so his
wife, Rosita, told him; and so his Mexicans believed.

But a new cloud was coming down through the pass, and Uncle Charley's eys grew grim. It clung close to the ground, and, against the white plume of dust behind, he could see the backs of steers. Beef cattle out of Chihuahua, hurrying down towards the dry lake-bed that lured them with its tremulous mirage. Another bunch of rustlers, running off the stock of American cattlemen, driven out by the Revolution.

Every so often they came pelting down through the pass until, dead with thirst, they arrived at his well and piled up against the gate of the corral. But never in twenty years had a rustler watered his stock there until Bear Paw Barr gave the word.

At a windlass below the house a team of mules dragged up water in a bull-hide on an iron ring, dumping it down with a splash above the concrete reservoir that fed it into the troughs. Every day they filled it up—enough for the house and gardens, and the cattle that dozed peacefully in the shade—but this rush of steers would drain the tank dry, once his Mexicans let down the bars.

From the shade of his brush shelter Bear Paw watched the distant herd as it stampeded towards the dry lake. Then he rose up, broadshouldered and massive, settled the pistol on his hip and stared at them through his telescope. It stood on a heavy tripod at the corner of his ramada, but scarcely had he racked it into focus when his wife came hurrying out "What?" she cried in Spanish. "More outlaws? More train-robbers? More Americans, driving off Mexican cattle? Would it not be better, Carlos, to open the gate this once instead of making them ask you?"

She crowded in to look as he drew his head away, and a little girl clutched at his leg.

"Let me see!" she pleaded. "Are they Texans—with big pistols in

"Let me see!" she pleaded. "Are they Texans—with big pistols in their belts?"

"Pistols all over them!" he nodded. "And rifles on their saddles. But your papacito knows just how to handle them, so you need not be afraid."

"Oh, what a ladrón!" exclaimed Rosita, starting back; and Bear Paw held Dolores up to look.

"What robber? Where?" she clamored; and her older sister edged her away.

"I see!" she cried. "A tall man on a black horse with a red handkerchief over one eye. Oh, what a creature! He is riding towards us—fast! Will he try to kill you, Papá?"

"Oh, no," smiled Papá. "Only make a big talk about it, to see whether I will fight. Then he will ask me please to open the gate for him and let his cattle drink. But run into the house now, Engracia, or you might learn some more bad words."

"What a country!" shuddered his wife, "in which to raise two little girls—although two boys would be worse. But come with me, children—and Carlos, please be careful. Remember your duty to your family."

"Yes, Sweetheart," he answered. "Go and pray to the Virgin, who has protected us these many years. I will stay and talk to Mr. One Eye and find out what he has on his mind."

He smiled and swung jauntly on his heel as the boss rustler rode up to the corral gate, where Barr's gente of Mexican cowboys stood armed and ready to fight. They were good men, and brave beyond their wort, for they knew that their patrón stood behind them; and, after cursing them out in bad Spanish, Mr. One Eye rode up to the boss. He was a hard-looking citizen, with one eye in a sling and the other badly bruised in some fight; but, such as it was, it gleamed death and destruction and Bear Paw regarded him warily.

"What did you say the name was?" he inquired; but One Eye was naming no names. Sure sign he was on the dodge, a fugitive from justice, but on the warpath like a wolf. "I say," he yelled, through a black beard caked with dust, "open up that gate and open it quick. Them cattle have smelled the water and they'll smash your whole fence down. Are these Mexicans working for you?"

"Yes, sir," responded Barr, "and they'll do just what I tell them, even to shooting a hole plumb through you. And another thing, Mister, you cant smash that gate down. It has stood off bigger herds than yours."

"Well, open it up then!" yelped the Texan. "Oh, hell!" and he ripped out a curse.

The forefront of the stampeding herd had hit the gate like a battering ram, but the bars held and the leaders went down. The crush from behind almost smothered them as they piled up against the fence and, bawling, came to a halt. They were big Hereford steers, full-fleshed when they had started out but gaunted down with thirst, and as they clashed their horns and bellowed Barr could read their ear-marks—every one a Diamond Bar.

Two men with Mexican hats—but both hatchet-faced Texans—rode up from the rear of the herd and reined in behind their chief. Then three more, with Indian features, and a fourth with long hair, came spurring in, wolf-eyed. They halted in a cloud of dust while, above the grumbling of the herd, Mr. One Eye spoke his piece.

"We want that gate opened," he announced. "Our cattle have got to drink."

"Yes?" observed Bear Paw; and waited.

"Any objections?" yapped out One Eye.

"None whatever, if you'll ask for it like a gentleman. That is a privilege I deny to no one. But after they have drunk, move on."

"O.K.1" nodded the chief and left there on the run as the Mexicans begun to throw down the bars. But before the gate was half open the steers started fighting their way through, trampling down their battered leaders as they filled the big corral with one rush.

Uncle Charley settled back in his rawhide chair and watched the rustlers toil and sweat, holding back the frantic cattle and closing the gate against them until the first herd had drunk its fill. Then they let in a second and a third—and a band of gaunted horses was brought up. Such horses as came only from Mexico, and the estates of rich Spanish land-owners. Though their glorious golden coats were crusted with dust they held their small heads high; and their slim, springy bodies revealed

lines of beauty as well as those of speed. They were silver-maned *palo-millos*, once the exclusive property of kings; and Bear Paw eyed them shrewdly.

"Nice looking band of horses," he said, when the boss rustler came back from the corrals and One Eye gave him a look.

"Yes," he replied, "if it's any of your business. Picked 'em up down in Mexico. That mare on a rope lost her colt a ways back. It give out—couldn't stand the dust."

"Better go back and get it," suggested Barr. "Them palomillos are valuable."

"Ump-umm!" shrugged the rustler. "It's dead by this time. How much do I owe you for that water?"

"Nothing at all," responded Uncle Charley. "All I ask is that you be dod-rammed careful, when you go, and don't pick up any of my crows"

"What the hell do you mean!" demanded the rustler indignantly; and Barr curled up the end of his grizzled moustache while he fixed him with his steely blue eyes.

"Just what I say," he answered. "I've had trouble with hombres like you before—and my rule is you can water once and move on."

"Uhkr!" grunted One Eye venomously. "But suppose I don't want to move on. My cattle are run down and too weak to ship—like to lay over and rest 'em a while."

"You can rest them somewhere else, so don't try to argue the point."

"Oh, I don't know—this is Government land, ain't it? I'm free, white and twenty-one and—"

"Yes, I know all about you," broke in Bear Paw contemptuously. "I served three years in the Texas Rangers learning to handle men of your stripe. I told you to move on and if you don't go I'll move you. Is that plain, or do you want me to show you?"

He hitched up his rifle and One Eve took the hint.

"That's plain enough," he grinned. "Who lives in that big, narrer canyon?"

"A gang of cow-thieves, like yourself. And they figure on holding it,

"Ever have any trouble with them?"

"No. None to speak of. They know me."

"Ho, ho!" burst out the rustler. "I reckon I know you, too. You're the

hombre they call Bear Paw that married a Mexican woman and-who lives in that next-narrer canyon?"

"Never mind—he's a bad man to monkey with. You look like you been in one fight already and come out second-best, so—"

"Nope, nope," grunted One Eye. "Appearances are deceiving. You ought to see the other man—they might be leading him around with a string, by this time. My name is Grif Lockhart, if that means anything to you—one of the toughest sons-of-guns ever run out of Mexico and looking around for a new place to locate. I like this country—all except the people that's in it—and I figger on coming back. Understand?"

"Wy yes!" laughed Bear Paw, taking a long step forward. "So you're a tough guy, eh? You and your great big pistol! I'd just love to see you use it!"

He stood waiting expectantly, but Lockhart swung up on his horse. "Nope," he said. "Another time, my friend, another time. I'll be back."

He spurred off after his men and Bear Paw made the motion of knocking him down with one hand—the gesture that had given him his name.

"You make me laugh," he said.

But he didn't laugh.

Chapter II

Will deep well of Uncle Charley Barr was far out in Animas Valley, at the tip of a long tongue of brush and mesquite-trees that the Mexicans called Punta de Agua. It was the point of an underground stream of water, extending from the portals of Pilares Canyon and sinking deeper as it flowed along. Bear Paw Well was nearly three hundred feet deep, equipped with a steam engine—the pride of the country-side—and a huge malacate, or hoist.

On ordinary days the team of mules at the windlass provided water enough for all, but now that the tank was drained dry Barr's Mexicans were getting up steam. Heavy sticks of iron-wood were flung into the fire-box, the engine hissed and chuffed; and as the bull-hide bucket fell with a slap all the women came out, smiling with their water-jars. balanced on their heads. Then the engine raced and clanked, the windlass wound up the rope; and the bucket, dumping its load, plunged down for more.

Ah, what a mdquina, what a wonderful piece of machinery! It hauled up water ten times as fast as the mule-team—and all at the expense of a few lengths of cord-wood and the labor of two men. It was so with everything that Don Carlos did—an intelligence higher than their own made life easy for his gente of Mexicans. There were no one-eyed cowboys in the Bear Paw outfit. Instead of sending them out to ride through the spines after snaky, long-horned cows, Uncle Charley fenced in his wells so that each corral was a cattle trap. In one night, with a single man at the gates, he could gather every head he owned.

During the heat of the day the wild cattle lay asleep under the mesquite-trees along the cut-banks of the wash. But as evening came on they sneaked out of their hiding places and headed for the well. Not in a hundred miles, on that desert, was there a place where they could steal a drink. Willy-milly, no matter how wild they were, they had to come to the big corral, where they could be trapped by the closing of a gate. And along the mountains on both sides of the Valley there was a drift fence that cut off escape.

All the patrón had to do was to keep up his fences and stand off the rustlers that came through—and that, for him, was a joke. He sat out under his shelter as the sun sank low, waving his hand to the Mexican children, shouting greetings to their parents and drinking from a big black bottle. As dusk came on they sprinkled the dancing-ground and scraped it smooth and hard. Then the music began—a violin, a guitar and a harp—and by the light of the engine, which kept on drawing water, they danced until far into the night.

Everybody was happy at Bear Paw Well except when the rustlers came through; and the next morning they saw their dust, half-way to the railroad, and thought no more about them. But from his lookout Uncle Charley gazed after them and shrugged. They were coming too thick and fast—with prices on their heads—driven out from their hiding places in Old Mexico. Fugitives from justice, train-robbers, cattle-thieves—and all of them wanted to stay. They saw the wide valley with wells along its rim—his white house set back in its garden, his corrais, his ditches, his fields. And all that stood between them and this prize was one man—and he was growing old.

Uncle Charley was old, his hair was turning gray and he let his men do most of the riding; but when the rustlers came through his youth returned—and with the pistol and rifle he was death, Quick death, sure death—so sure that no one tried him. He sometimes wished they would. But this last man, this One Eye, had promised to come back, and Bear Paw knew him for a killer. A rough, blustering fellow, with some hard men behind him and the hog-eye of the congenital murderer. Barr had learned to know it from the Rangers. And a natural-born cow-thief—that was sure.

Nestor, the white bearded *mayordomo*, had mustered his cowboys at dawn, for their *patrón* had work to be done; and now, taking his hat off, he stood at attention, to receive his orders for the day

"Send half of your men," directed Barr, "to follow the stolen herd and pick up any strays; but tell them to keep well behind until I join them, later. It is better to lose a few cattle than to get into a fight with these Texans.

"With the rest of your men, ride back on their trail and look for that colt that was lost. A pure-strain palomillo—too valuable to let die—I want it to give to Engracia. So take water and a mare for milk. It will return to where its mother suckled it last; for that is their nature, as you know. Probably close beside the trail, but if you miss it going out, spread wide and rake the plain."

"51, Schort" replied Nestor, saluting; and Bear Paw watched them as they rode off south. It was far across the Sink, on the edge of the dry lake, that they gathered about their find; but they did not bring it back. Instead, they scattered out, swinging their ropes at a man who fought them off with bare hands. Uncle Charley looked again through his spy-glass and went galloping out to join them.

When he came up with his men, Nestor was riding ahead, leading a crazy man who cursed as he walked; and, over his neck like a lady's fur, he was carrying the palomillo colt. It was a beautiful little creature, but very thin and lank; and when the patrón questioned Nestor he was hacked.

"We found the colt, Señor, as you directed; but this loco claims it is his. And every time we try to take it away from him, to give it a drink, he fights and threatens to kill us. So I am leading him back to the ranch." "Very good," nodded Bear Paw, and fell in beside him; the cowboys followed behind.

The crazy man paced on in his knee-high Coahuila leggings, his head bowed—except when they came too close, when he threw it far back to look.

"Are you Grif Lockhart?" he demanded, blinking his eyes as he glared up at Barr. Then he mumbled and shook his head, the hair of which was stuck down with blood. "The son-of-a-goat," he cursed, "fd know him anywhere—afoot or a-horsehack. Did you ever see a razor-backed hog, fighting mad and ready to charge? His eyes are just like that. Red! And ugly as hell."

"Have a drink," suggested Barr, reaching out his canteen; but the man did not see it. He was blind.

"I'm going to whip him," he burst out vehemently. "He hit me over the head with his gun."

"Aha!" nodded Don Carlos, "this is the man One Eye spoke of—the one that he whipped in a fight."

"To be sure," agreed Nestor. "Another of the train-robbers, that they have gone off and left for dead. But why should he think that this colt is his—and get off his horse to carry it?"

"He is out of his head," replied Barr. "We must stop him, and give the colt water."

"Have a drink," he said again, shaking the canteen closer and closer; and at the slosh of water the man stopped.

"Give me that!" he shouted, making a grab for the canteen; and, laying the colt on the ground, he poured some water down its throat.

"That's enough," warned Barr, as it choked and struggled to escape, and Nestor struck the canteen away.

"Bring up the mare!" he commanded, "and let the potro suck!"

"No!" thundered the crazy man, flinging the colt over his shoulders again "You are trying to steal him—I know!"

"Leave him alone," ordered Bear Paw, as the loco's eyes grew wild; and he plodded on towards the house. Many times before they had rescued lost travelers, but here was a new kind of fish. Instead of drinking all the water and making himself sick he insisted upon giving it to the colt. But, whether crazy with the heat or from the blows on his head, he was like all the rest of them in this. A frenzy came over him when he

hit the long trail and he hurried on till he dropped. Then up again-still clinging to the colt.

"We must take it away from him," decided Bear Paw at last: but

the crazy man's strength had returned.

He fought so hard that, for fear of injuring the colt, they stopped to think what to do next; and, while they debated. Engracia came galloping out, no longer a little girl but a young lady in a long riding-skirt which tripped her when she jumped off.

"Did you find it?" she cried, brushing the dirt off her hands as she ran in to see the colt. "Oh, you dear little thing! You darling!" And she took it in her arms. Away from the crazy man-who looked at her blankly, then turned and fell on his face.

T T was midday when Bear Paw came tramping into the house, after a long ride to the north, and asked how the train-robber was. They had placed him in the guest-chamber, where the light would not hurt his eyes; and the servants were all gathered by the door. Inside Barr found his wife, who motioned him to be still, watching over the crazy man as he slept.

"Look," she said, pointing. "Is he not like a Christ-picture? The beard-the face-everything!"

Uncle Charley laughed so loud that he woke the patient up; and yet when he looked at him, there was a certain resemblance to the Christus that hung above the bed. His scanty yellow beard, his sad cast of countenance and the white cloth bound about his head; but Barr had heard his language when they tried to take away the colt and his laughter could not be restrained.

"Him a Christus!" he roared, "Like the picture of a saint! More like a bandit, or some horse-thief from Old Mexico! But take good care of him-he may live to kill One Eve!"

"But no, papacito," protested Engracia. "He is a good man and has given me the colt. And did not the good Christ carry a lamb in his arms? We love him and want him to stav!"

"Yes, Carlos," joined in his wife. "His name is Juanito—Johnny Kew—and you saved him from certain death. The good God has sent him to be taken care of; and he is not a train-robber, I know! Such kind eyes he has and—"

"Just a horse-thief, eh?" jested Bear Paw "Well, anyhow, he brought Engracia a nice colt. And how is it getting along?"

"It sucks," stated his daughter, "but it wants its mother back. Don't you think, if we told One Eye, he would send the mare home?"

"Ho! Him!" scoffed Barr, "Do you know what he would do? Come all the way back to take the colt away from you. That's the kind of hombre he is."

"But the little colt whinnies and runs around its pen when it ought to lie down and rest. Such a dear little thing—and if we could only find its mother—"

There was a stir from the pillow and Juanito opened his eyes and sat up.

at up.
"When I feel a little stronger," he said. "I will get its mother back."

"No burry, no burry," soothed Bear Paw, "She's right out on the plain at the mouth of Texas Canyon—along with the rest of the band, only tied up to a tree. Those three bad-looking half-breeds are riding, herd on the bunch, with a bottle of whiskey for company. Do you reckon you can whip them all?"

Johnny Kew fixed him with eyes that glowed ominously, then he closed the swollen lids and sighed.

"When I get my strength back," he said.

"Well," chuckled Barr, "you did a good job on Grif Lockhart before he knocked you out; but these three half-breeds are big, heavy-built men—"

"Lockhart!" repeated Kew; and lay awhile, thinking. "Was he the man I had a fight with?"

"Wy, sure!" answered Bear Paw, impatiently. "You knew all about it, this morning—the way you were cussing him out and threatening to kill him! A big, rough guy with black hair and beard—"

"I-I can't remember, now," said Johnny, wearily; and Mrs. Barr plucked her husband out of the room.

"Can't you see?" she scolded, "how sick he is? Go away and let him sleep—then his memory will return."

"Oh, he knows him," returned Barr, "only he won't admit it. That

was a hard-game outfit—on the dodge, every one of them—and this boy is on the dodge, too. But he's a nice-looking kid and we'll keep him awhile, until that head of his gets well. Then out he goes, before we begin to like him—"

"But we like him already, Carlos! Such a soft, gentle voice—and he gave Engracia the colt as if he had brought it on purpose."

"He was out of his head!" asserted Bear Paw roughly; "I know them, the whole border breed. The nicer they are the quicker they'll skin you. How do you think he got the colt—and all of these other horses that he claims? Did some Spanish hidalgo give them to him? Well! He's a horse-thief, ain't he?"

"Yes, but such a nice boy! And so young! Surely, Carlos, they took him with them against his will. Then they beat him and left him for dead. Oh, he talked all the time until he went to sleep, and I know he hates this Lockhart."

"Talked, eh?" leered Bear Paw. "Was Engracia there? A fine chance she had to learn some more cusswords. But never mind—he gave her the colt. We're not running a home for busted-down horse-thieves, or train-robbers on the dodge; but if, as you say, God sent him to our house—"

"Yes, Carlos!" she smiled; and, giving him a joyous hug, she went back to close the door.

It was dark before she opened it, and there was no sound of breathing. No sign, in fact, that Johnny Kew was there; and when she brought a light he was gone.

"What now?" demanded Barr when a hurried search revealed that Juanito's horse was gone, too. His saddle and bridle, also—and there were tracks heading north. "Hm!" observed Uncle Charley as the family returned to the house. "This begins to look like an inside job. How, otherwise, could this poor sick boy get his horse and nobody know? How could he saddle it and head straight for Texas Canyon unless some-body pointed out the way? Come here, Engracia, and tell me the truth—did you help Juanito go?"

"Yes, Papá," she answered, lightly. "But I didn't think you would mind. He just went to get the mother of the little colt he gave me, and he promised to be right back."

"Santa Maria!" exclaimed the Señora, throwing up her hands. "He

will die, I know, from that wound in his head. Engracia, what were you thinking of?"

"Never mind," consoled Bear Paw. "Perhaps if he dies now it will save him from a worse fate. Any man that can get his horse like that and ride off without being seen—is an experienced outlaw, and doubtless born to be hung. Taking advantage of a little girl, like that!"

"I am not a little girl!" declared Engracia, running to strike at him as he held out his big hands. "He is a nice man and I like him and when I grow up—"

"Yes? Yes?" prompted her father. "Go on!"

"I'm going to marry him!" she said.

"You see?" observed Bear Paw, rolling his eyes at his wife. "Our daughter is growing up. Have you spoken of this to him, Engracia?"

"No, not yet," she admitted; and jumped into his arms as he laughed

"Never mind, my little one," he said. "He is gone, and let this be a lesson. The next time a man comes through that looks like a saint-picture, be careful what you do. He is a bad actor and has fooled women before. In the morning I will ride up to Texas Canyon and see if he has whipped those three half-breeds."

He threw back his head and laughed heartily—and all the others joined in, except Engracia; but in the morning she was the first to hear the whinneying of the mare and run bouncing out to the gate. She was there, the poor, panting mother; and from his pen by the corrals the little colt was answering back while he tried to break down the fence. So Engracia unhooked the gate and let its mother in, before the others were up. Then she opened the colt's pen and was watching the family reunion when Bear Paw cane out to look.

Chapter IV

Something happened every day at Bear Paw Well and Uncle Charley was prepared; but when he saw the palomillos trotting in from the north—with Johnny Kew in their wake—he was startled out of his calm. Because Johnny, who had ridden off unarmed, was weighed down

with pistols and gun-belts and had four rifles hung on his saddle. But his head was beaten up worse than ever and one eye was completely closed.

Perhaps because of that, or because the guns were in his way, he fell off when he tried to dismount; and all the Mexicans ran to pick him up. But Don Carlos waved them aside and carried him into the house himself

"For as good a fighting man as you," he said, as he laid Kew on his bed, "I am going to violate the rule of a lifetime and give you a drink out of my private bottle. Did you kill those three half-breeds or just cripple them?"

Johnny laughed, a little weakly until he had had his drink, but there was a glad light in his blue eyes.

"I worked them over with this six-shooter," he said. "That's what they did to me. All jumped me at once, when I had Lockhart whipped; but you bet ye I had my revenge."

He sighed and handed up the pistol, which still dangled from his hip, and Bear Paw examined it critically.

"That's right," he said. "Here's their hair on the guard. I see that long-haired rascal came back."

"Yes," said Kew, "there were four of them. But the half-breeds were all drunk. Will somebody take care of my horses?"

"Sure," agreed Barr. "Why didn't you bring back theirs? That's the first principle of border warfare—to put your enemies afoot."

"Well, you see"—and Johnny smiled—"I'm not a regular outlaw, so I just turned their horses loose."

"You'll do," commended Bear Paw, pouring him out another drink. "I made a slight mistake when I sized you up at first, but I hope you won't hold it against me. You're a fighter right—and one horse-thief in a thousand."

"Yeah," nodded Kew. "I got 'em back. But I'm kinder tired right now."

He settled his head on the pillow and instantly dropped to sleep, and Uncle Charley beckened his wife.

"Go ahead and fix him up," he said. "And don't worry—he'll stay awhile, this time."

The owner of sixteen palomillos, each worth a fortune in pesos, slept long and woke up with a smile. He was back in his old bed, children were gathered about him, and Engracia was caressing his hand.

"What are you going to do with Coltie's mother?" she asked; and the others hung on his words.

"Why, give her to you," he answered, as if surprised; and Engracia leaned over and kissed him.

"He is a good man," said her mother to Bear Paw, "he has given the mare to Engracia. Poor boy, he has a good heart."

"Yes," agreed Barr. "He is generous."

"And he can stay with us, then?" pleaded Engracia.

"As long as he is sick," put in her mother, gently. "But now we must let him sleep."

A summer storm came up, leaking through every mud roof and soaking the parched range for miles, and still Juanito kept to his bed. The last beating he had taken had sapped his strength and he lay listless, his head swathed in white. Outside, above the rain, he could hear the toads croaking, and the thunder of running water in the wash. Never for years had there been such a flood—the dry bed of the sink became a lake again. In a couple of days the grass was up everywhere and the cattle did not come down to drink.

All over the plain there was water in shallow pools, the mesquite-trees sent out tender shoots; and by the time Johnny could sit out under the ramada the desert flowers were up. Great patches of yellow and blue appeared on the sandy slopes and, for lack of dust, the whirlwinds disappeared. Yet every night, as they listened to the music and watched the dancers below, Johnny looked at the heat-lightning over Mexico. The war was still on, but no more rustlers came.

Since he had got back his horses and seen them carefully corralled Johnny Kew had gone into the silence. Where he had got them, why he thought they were his and what he would do with them next, were things never discussed. It was taken for granted that they were stolen from Old Mexico and that pretty soon Johnny would go—pass on to the north, like the rest of the rustlers, and take his palomillos with him. But, though she knew he was a thief, Engracia was still faithful to him.

She loved to smooth back Kew's yellow hair and beard to make him look more like Christus, and, perching boldly on his knee, she caressed the white scars as his battered face healed.

"Come over here," commanded her father, as they sat in the dusk, "and sit on my knee a while. You are a big girl now, and getting heavy, and Mr. Kew is not very strong." "Yes, papacito," she responded, and went to work on his hair. It stood up in a bristling roach that defied all attempts to smooth it down, but Bear Paw was only building up for his joke.

"Who are you going to marry when you grow up?" he asked; and Engracia glanced at her mother.

"My Juanito," she answered; and they laughed.

"But perhaps," hinted her father, "he has another girl—back east or down in Chihuahua. That is the way with all these Americans who skin across the Line. Either they have run away with a big sum of money or somebody has stolen their girl."

"Well, perhaps," admitted Kew as they all looked at him expectantly. "But Engracia has helped me to forget that there are other kinds of girls in the world. It has been very pleasant to stay here in your home and see you all so happy together; but, now that I am well, I will move on."

"But why?" demanded Engracia, going back and sitting on his knee; but her mother beckoned her away and led her into the house.

"In the morning," said Kew; and Uncle Charley nodded.

It was early when Johnny strode down to the corral and threw his saddle on the palomillo stud; and Bear Paw watched him go, saying nothing. Yet he could not but notice a sudden change in his appearance. He had a bone-handled six-shooter hung low on his hip and a saddle-gun under his knee; and he sat up, straight and free. He seemed in a hurry to get away, and he never looked back at the gate.

Uncle Charley stared after him, opened his mouth to shout, thought better of it and turned to the south. There was a dust-cloud down the valley—not coming through Lost Pass at all but drifting in across the desert, where before not even a burro could live. And to the left there was another cloud. He leapt to his telescope and was watching it intently when Engracia ran out from the house.

"Where is Johnny?" she asked. "Is he gone?"

"Yes," growled Bear Paw, after a silence; and at a thought he turned to look after him.

"Engracia," he said, "do you think you could catch up with him? That same old gang of rustlers is coming back—One Eye and his bunch."

"But what shall I say?" pleaded Engracia, who had suddenly begun to cry; and her father patted her head.

"Tell him I need him," he said. "Tell him Lockhart is coming back." Engracia was still crying when she brought out Coltie's mother and led her through the north gate; but she went, and she brought Johnny back.

He followed along reluctantly, bringing his band of horses with him, and she did not even try to talk to him. Juanito had changed, his voice was rough now, and at the gate he came to a halt.

"What do you want?" he shouted up to Barr; and Bear Paw saw he had waited too long.

"Stay a while," he said, "until these rustlers get by. I need a little help, Mr. Kew."

"Oh," answered Johnny; and looked back up the trail. Then he turned and glanced at Engracia, who smiled up at him bravely.

"We want you to stay," she stated.

"What?" he demanded. "A train-robber? A horse-thief? An evil influence on your youth?"

"Yes," she said, and he laughed; glancing up at her father on the hill.
"What's your proposition?" he inquired; and Bear Paw became

strictly business-like.

"Five dollars a day and found," he said.

"O.K.," answered Johnny. "I'll stay till they get by. But I'll live with the Mexicans," he added.

Chapter V

Twile two herds of cattle were traveling fast, and Bear Paw had had a hunch. As far as he could see with his telescope he had recognized the big, raw-boned black that was Grif Lockhart's favorite mount. He was living up to his promise to come back and take over the country, and he had brought the Wild Bunch with him. The same bad hombres who had been with him before—and a hell-scad of others, to hoot.

Pancho Villa was marching back through Chihuahua, driving the last of the Americans across the Line; and here they were, turned rustler for lack of something better to do, but game to tackle anything. "Know any of those men?" inquired Barr, as Kew took a squint through the telescope, and Johnny nodded his head.

"I should've kept a-going," he said. "They'll try to take away my horses."

"Go ahead!" responded Bear Paw bluffly; but Juanito only shrugged.

"No," he decided. "I've got a little unfinished business with Mister Lockhart, and this is just as good a place as any. Only I'm going to ask you, as a favor, to keep those other dogs back."

"I think I can take care of that," nodded Barr. "Do you reckon we can get him to fight?"

"Easy," grinned Johnny, "if you can just get the drop on him and make him give up his guns. Then I'll come out, call the son-of-a-which by his right name and lick him to a whisper."

"Good enough!" said Bear Paw; and Johnny went into hiding to wait.

The two herds spread out, rustler-fashion, taking in Bear Paw's cattle as they passed; but they kept right on till, swinging to the east, they turned up Point of Water Wash. Then, followed by his gun-men, Grif Lockhart rode over to have it out with Barr.

"Well," he began with a hectoring laugh, "here I am, Old-timer—back again, and with two thousand head. When I was here before, you mentioned the fact that you and your Mexicans owned this country. I wonder how you feel about that now."

"Does it make any difference?" inquired Bear Paw.

"Not the slightest," returned Lockhart with a loud guffaw. "I believe I'll stay a while."

Yesr

"Yes. Up at Pilares. Where those other rustlers live. This is just the place to rest my cattle before I ship them east, and that big rain was certainly a Godsend. Pancho Villa has come back and cleaned up the country—run all the American cattlemen out. But he left the cattle, see—about two hundred thousand of them—and I figger on getting my share.

"I've got a lot of American cowboys that stayed a leetle too long and had to fight their way out; and they say that, for them, killing Mexicans is just a pastime, so bring your gente on."

He looked around as if expecting to find them, and there was a wild, crazy look in his eyes that had never been there before.

"Nope," returned Bear Paw easily. "I sent my gente away. A little job like this I can handle myself. What's biting on you now?"

Lockhart had stopped and was staring at Kew's horses, which he had seen over the top of their corral; and when he turned he wore a crafty smile.

"Aha!" he said. "So that's where they went to! I'll just trouble you to give them horses back."

"No trouble," answered Barr, "if you can prove they are yours.

Otherwise the first man that tries to put a rope on one is liable to run out of luck."

"They're mine, ain't they?" challenged Lockhart, slumping down in his left stirrup so his pistol would be nearer his right hand; then as they faced each other he stepped down to the ground, where his horse would not spoil his aim. But in that tense moment, which so often precedes a draw, Engracia stepped out the gate.

"You can't have my Coltie!" she declared; and Lockhart favored her with a long stare.

"Well, well!" he exclaimed. "Who's this? Awful pretty little Mexican girl, if anybody should ask. In a few years, now..."

"My daughter!" rapped out Bear Paw; and motioned her away. She had been hiding in the garden, looking out through the fence; but now she stood her ground, defiantly.

"Wha-at?" laughed the rustler. "Your daughter! Didn't you have any outside help? Well, how old air ye, anyway?"

He was cut off in the midst of a loud guffaw by the jab of a gun-barrel in the ribs, and his hands went up like a shot.

"Now!" said Bear Paw, a killing light in his eyes. "Unbuckle that gun-belt and throw it behind ye, and don't make yourself so common ground here."

He stood waiting as Lockhart made haste to obey him—then laughed and labbed him again.

"Heh!" he jeered. "So you're bad, eh? Going to settle at Pilares and make yourself at home! Steal a lot of my cows and run me out of the country—Engracia, go into the house."

Engracia went reluctantly, and as the gate closed behind her Johnny Kew stepped into the open. The bone-handled six-shooter was well to the front and, after a single glance at Lockhart, he turned on the Wild Bunch and laughed at them insultingly. "You're a fine bunch of sore-heads," he said. "I sure combed your hair with my six-shooter, but I'm going to whip this man Lockhart with my hands."

"Uhr!" returned Grif, suddenly sensing a way out. "Still think you can fight with your hands, hey?"

"Yes, you damned cow-thief," answered Johnny, throwing his gunbelt away as he advanced. "I just want to have another crack at you, with nobody to hit me from behind. And if I don't make you get down and beg—"

"You're nothing but a horse-thief, yourself," taunted Lockhart, "so don't get so high and mighty."

"There's a difference," came back Kew, "in the way I got my horses and the way you got those cattle. My way is called 'War!' "

He stepped in, his hands up, the light of battle in his eyes; and Lockhart glanced at Barr.

"A fair fight is all I ask," he said. "Do I git it?"

"You do!" declared Bear Paw. "And if your men butt in again I'll cut them down like that!"

He snapped his fingers contemptuously and the Wild Bunch blinked, but the fight had already begun.

"Come on!" challenged Grif, putting up his hairy hands; and Kew rushed him with such a shower of blows that he landed him on his back.

"Come again," grunted Lockhart, shaking the blood out of his eyes and advancing at a crouch; and Johnny began to box. He stepped back, he tapped his foot, made a feint and hopped back again. Then as Grif charged in, swinging, Kew leapt to one side—and struck. There was a crack, and the rustler fell. So quickly had it happened that no one saw the blow, but Lockhart lay like a dead man.

"Get up!" ordered Johnny; and when he did not move he touched him with the toe of his boot.

"Anyone else?" he inquired, looking over at the Wild Bunch. "I'll take you all on at once."

"Nope. One at a time," ruled Bear Paw. But the Wild Bunch had seen enough. They muttered among themselves, turning away to conceal their shame, and rode off down the hill.

"Nestor!" shouted Barr, as they halted by the corrals and looked back. "Bring up that old horse that hauls guts from the slaughter-house. Then pile this dead dog on the sled and dump him where his friends can find him."

"Oho-ho!" he went on, pacing back and forth and laughing at the outcome of the fight; while from their houses below, the Mexicans came swarming out, hardly believing that what they saw was real. Yet the patrón was still laughing; Don Juanito breathed softly on one hand, and One Eye lay sprawling in the dirt. They loaded him on the sled and dragged him off, groaning, to where his followers could pick him up.

"Brink me the black bottle!" shouted Bear Paw; and poured out the drinks for two.

Chapter VI

"It tell you," observed Bear Paw, confidentially, as he poured Kew another drink, "I rather looked for those rascals to fight. Don't think for a minute that they wasn't set to go, but we got their goats from the start. Now! The next question is, can we handle the whole bunch or had I better holler for help? That's something an old Ranger hates to do: but—well, what do you think. Mr. Kew?"

"I'd holler," advised Johnny. "They're too many for you. And besides, they've got all those cows."

"That's the point—that's the point!" agreed Barr. "One Texas Ranger can stand off a hundred men, but can he get back his cows? These fellers are mostly Texans, and if I ride up with my gente the fire-works are going to begin. But four more Texas Rangers—men that were never known to weaken—game to charge hell with a bucket of water—"

"Sure!" grinned Kew. "But can you get 'em?"

"In twenty-four hours, if they ain't off on the round-up or out of the country shipping cattle. Every one an old pardner in Company D, of the Frontier Battalion. I'd better wire 'em. What?"

"Write the telegrams," said Johnny. "And I'll take 'em into town. When you want something delivered sure—the best and only way is to deliver it yourself."

"You're right about that," nodded Bear Paw; and reached for a piece of paper.

McDonald will be enough. If I sent for them all they'd laugh at me."

"You're the doctor," responded Kew; and hit the road for Yermo.

The boss was still sitting out under his ramada when his hired gunman came back, but his manner had suddenly changed.

"No!" he roared when Johnny brought up the subject, "you don't move down with them Mexicans. They're fine people-I like 'em-but you stay right here with me."

"But what about your wife-and Engracia?"

"This is 'War,' " declared Barr, "and women don't count, I'm fighting for my range and twenty thousand head of cattle-and Engracia is all right, anyway. Did you get that telegram off?"

"Yes, sir!" responded Kew, straightening up,

"Uhhr!" grunted Bear Paw, looking him over, "You've been a soldier, eh? I ought to have known, the way you handled your dukes-"

"No. sir!" broke in Johnny, staring straight ahead; and Uncle Charley smiled understandingly.

"O.K." he said. "It's nothing to me. Sit down and have another drink. I'm glad vou're back, Johnny, because we've received some very bad news, This man, Grif Lockhart, is more than a rustler-he just killed his wife, down in Mexico. It wasn't an hour after you left that a man came down from his camp and told us the whole damned story. He killed her in her sleep-and her lover that was with her. That's the kind of an hombre he is."

"We'll have to look out for him," said Kew at last; and Uncle Charley nodded, grimly,

"His own men are afraid of him-they're beginning to desert. He's gone bad and turned out a killer."

There was a silence over the Mexican village all that day, but as evening came on and the music began they drifted out to the dance-floor. The news about One Eve had frightened them at first and made the women keep to their houses, but they knew that the patrón would protect them and only a vague sadness remained. Poor woman, she had died in the arms of her lover, thinking her husband far away. But he had come back secretly, watching her bedroom at night until he saw her light go out. Then he had let himself in.

It was such a tragedy as often happened in Old Mexico, but almost

never was the woman killed. The man, perhaps—it was the price he paid—but this rough One Eye would do anything. They had noticed, those who had seen him, the wild look in his eyes—but Juanito had tamed his pride and Don Carlos had exposed him to shame, hauling him away like offal from the slaughter-house. So, seeing el Patrón at his lookout, they left the rest to him and joined in the solace of the dance.

But the tragedy was not yet ended, for out of the night rode three men—the brothers of the woman who had been killed. They appeared in the fire light—tall and swarthy, weighed down with weapons—and related the story of their sister's shame. Then, dramatically, they told how they had washed their hands in her heart's blood and taken an oath to average her.

Nestor led them up to see Don Carlos, and he heard them through to the end.

"My friends," he said at last, "this American is desperate. He knows he will be followed to punish him for this crime and so he will be waiting to kill you. But stay here with us until morning and I will go with you, with all my gente."

"No!" declared the eldest brother. "We have sworn an oath never to sleep or rest till we have avenged our sister's death. Tonight—right now—we are riding up the canyon, and before dawn we will be dead or revenged."

He rode off without stopping and his brothers followed after him, though they lurched in the saddle like drunken men and Nestor and the Mexicans shook their heads. How could men as weary as that expect to cope with the savage Texans, just returned from the war in Mexico? They were going into a trap, and long before daylight the sound of scattered shooting began; then a burst of frenzied gun-fire, a running fight through the darkness and a few parting shots, far to the south.

Nestor came up to beg the boss to hurry, but not until the sun was well above the mountains would Bear Paw lead the way. This riding up brushy washes and into knife-slash canyons was not to his liking at all, and when he did start he sent scouts ahead, and posted others on the flanks. But when they came to the gate below the mount of Pilares they found two of the brothers, dead. This much they had expected, but the rustlers were gone; and at last they ventured up the canyon.

Bear Paw took the lead, with Johnny Kew behind him and the Mexicans not far in the rear; but, passing through the narrow portals into

the open valley above, there was not a soul in sight. There was a ranchhouse, but no one in it; rocky crags just made for ambush; and many cattle-tracks, all pointing north.

"That's all I need to know," stated Barr; and led his gente back. They stopped at the gate to bury the two brothers and set crosses over their graves, but as they were riding down the wash, heavy-hearted, they heard a yell ahead. It was followed by the drumming of a horse's feet, a big American came galloping around the point and Bear Paw charged down to meet him.

"Hello, Sandy!" he shouted, and they fell into an embrace that nearly dragged Barr off his horse.

McDonald was a man over six feet tall, broad and rugged, with a black mustache and buck-teeth; and after the first mauling he glanced once at the Mexicans and continued his friendly greetings.

"Well—B'ar Paw!" he laughed. "Just as handsome as ever! But what's this—hollering for help?"

"False alarm," admitted Barr. "Bunch of rustlers moved in on me, but they changed their minds and left. Taking with them a lot of my cattle. And killing two Mexicans this morning."

"Must be close, then," observed Sandy. "Come on, let's go after them. I seen the sheriff in Yermo and he said he cain't handle the rascals. Go ahead and clean 'em up—it's all right with him. We won't need these gentlemen. I reckon."

He rolled his eyes again at the downcast Mexicans, and Bear Paw took the hint.

"No." he said, jerking his head down the wash; and Nestor and the gente passed on. This was one of the "Rinjers" that Don Carlos had been waiting for, who would charge hell with a bucket of water; but, being a Texano, he was not a friend of their people—nor were they friendly to him. It was not a time, as they looked at it, for whoops of laughter and buffoonery; with two men killed that morning and just buried by the gate. But that was the way of the Gringos, and they went back to the ranch.

"Have a drink," invited Sandy, fetching a bottle from his pocket; and after his friend had kissed it he passed it on to Johnny.

"Mr. Kew," said Barr, "shake hands with Sergeant McDonald. We served together in Company D."

"Howdy," observed Sandy, and looked at Barr again.

"He's all right," stated Bear Paw. "A gunman and a good one. Just stayed over a few days to help me." $\,$

"Oh! Aha!" grinned McDonald. "Glad to meet you, Mr. Kew. Well, that makes three of us, so let's hit the trail and git them cattle back. Been having a lot of trouble myself with rustlers, and they's only one way to handle 'em. Sooner or later, you've got to come to it. All right. Charlew—lead the way."

Chapter VII

The bottle of whiskey was empty, they were out of grub, and not a rustler in sight; but still Ranger Barr pressed on. Sergeant McDonald was behind him, his big rifle across the saddle, keeping a lookout on both sides; but the cattle-thieves had taken to the hills. All except the main bunch, who had been pushing the cattle on—and their tracks were two days old.

"Nope," said Uncle Charley as they paused on the divide and looked out the country below, "they've made their get-away, slick and clean. I'm getting old, Sandy—I let this Lockhart fool me. All he could talk about was taking away my range—settling down in Pilares Canyon and all that. Just the place he needed to rest up his cattle when he brought them out of Mexico. Then he kept right on going and he's got two days' start on me. I've got to be getting home."

"Well—maybe," dissented Sandy, "but what about the hombres that killed those two Mexicans last night?"

"That's just what I was thinking," grinned Bear Paw. "They might rob me again, while I'm gone."

Barr had lost a lot of cattle but he had got rid of Grif Lockhart, as cold-blooded a murderer as he had ever laid eyes on, and the price was not too much. The lake was drying up fast and getting brackish, his cows were coming back to the wells; and, when that lake was empty, Animas Valley would be his again. All he had to do, in the natural order of things, was wait awhile and just let it happen; but McDonald was a driver.

"No, sir!" he declared, over the bottle that night, "that's where you're

everlastingly wrong. You've lived with these Mexicans so long you're beginning to learn their ways, and this mañana stuff is n.g. We'll go up there in the morning, while these rustlers are away, and burn their corrals and that house down. Then we'll fix up your fence, where they've torn it down, and build a new kind of gate. A gate that'll close, no matter how you leave it.

"After that we'll build a fort out of logs and rocks, right there at the mouth of the canyon; and the next time Mr. Lockhart brings in a bunch of cattle we'll cut his herd, by gorry. Either that or shoot hell out of him—and of the two Td recommend the latter. He's sure to come back, like all bad actors, so while you've got me here let's call for a show-down and scare him from one fit into a thousand. Rise up and throw down on him before he knows it, and when he reaches for his six-shooter—blam!"

With some such idea as this in mind they rode up to the gate next day—and the next, and the next, with some Mexicans to do the work —until the fence, gate and fort were done. Then they started in making cattle-traps out of long, limber poles, so placed through the fence that they would let cows and calves in and keen them from getting out again.

A week passed like a day, and another week after that; and they were sitting in the fort, watching the Mexicans work, when a buckboard came in sight. In it there sat a man with a hard-boiled black hat on and a brand-new suit of city clothes; but behind him rode six rustlers that Bear Paw knew, and he reached over for his gun.

"Grif Lockhart, by the gods!" he gasped; and hollered for the Mexicans to duck. Then he knelt down at a loop-hole, with Kew and Mc-Donald beside him, and waited for the buckboard to come up. It was drawn by a team of matched grays and, lashed on behind, were two immense trunks with ribbons and old shoes attached. Things were coming too thick and fast for Barr to get everything—and all he needed to know was that here came his enemy, and they were going to have that show-down, right now.

The Mexicans fled for cover, Grif gave a loud whoop, and as he burst out laughing something detached itself from his side and they saw it was a woman—laughing back. A young woman, a pretty woman, dressed in the height of fashion; and the mere sight of her knocked them cold. Not even the Wild Burch, riding close behind the buggy, brought the gunmen out of their trance; but when Lockhart reined in before the newly-made gate he looked around and saw them.

Every gun was on him and he sat frozen in his seat, but the woman held their eyes. Seen close she was a beauty, as out of place with Grif Lockhart as a nymph with Caliban; and she was startled too. Startled, but not afraid—and Lockhart got his nerve back first.

"My wife, gentlemen," he said, bowing politely; and one of his body-

guard flung open the gate. He reached out with his long whip and flicked the grays daintily, and she smiled as they sped away.

"But the gods!" exclaimed Bear Paw lowering his gun. Kew doffed

"By the gods!" exclaimed Bear Paw, lowering his gun; Kew doffed his hat instinctively. McDonald burst out in a curse.

"What's this? Is that him?" he clamored. "Why didn't you tell me he was married?"

"Because," said Uncle Charley, "we didn't know, ourselves. Holy Mother, is she married to that man!"

"Looks like it," answered Sandy. "Unless they done kidnapped her. Who were those tough mugs behind?"

"A bunch of his rustlers!" wailed Barr. "Coming back! And we never even burned the corrals! It's a wonder they didn't shoot us while we were sitting here, gawking; but it's too late to do anything now. If I thought for a minute this was a case of kidnapping—what are you so gabby about, Kew?"

"Nothing!" answered Johnny, shortly.

"Well, what do you think? Are they married?"

"Yes!" he yapped. "Couldn't you see the trunks and old shoes? He's even shaved off that beard. Forty years old if he's a day, and she's just over sixteen."

"Dressed up like a dude—a silk handerchief sticking out of his breastpocket—and bringing her up to that house! It's a wonder we hadn't burned it to the ground—but hell, it's nothing but a shack!"

"Well, come on!" grumbled McDonald. "Let's get out of here before we do something we hadn't orter. I could see at a glance that she'd jest been married. But, oh—what she's thinking now!"

"Yes, and oh, what I'm thinking now!" echoed Barr. "How can I go up there and tell them to move with that little lady around? I suppose he's told her he's a very rich cattleman, and she's due for a terrible disappointment; but it's a little too late to save her now, so we might as well go home. Go home and get our nerve back and open another bottle

while we drink to the lady's health. The blushing bride—haugh! And only a month ago he was killing his other wife, down in Mexico."

"I pass!" shuddered Johnny Kew; and they rode away in silence.

Chapter VIII

Bear Paw knew that Grif Lockhart was a crook, a man capable of almost anything; but that he would come back to Pilares—where he was sure to have trouble—with a new and charming wife was more than he could believe. It took him two days to think the matter over, and for once Sandy McDonald was stumped. He had been all set to hold up Mr. Lockhart—and shoot the doll-rags out of him if necessary—but even his iron nerve was shattered.

It was only when they heard that the rustlers were all back, cutting posts to make more corrals, that they roused up and decided to do something. A little late in the day, it suddenly dawned on Barr that this was just another of Lockhart's tricks. How else, without a fight, could he get back into his holdout? And what to him was another woman, more or less? Hadn't he just killed his last one, down in Mexico? Perhaps the best thing for the bride was to make her a widow—quick—and explain their motives later.

They set out the next morning with Bear Paw in the lead; but when, all set to shoot, they emerged from Pilares Pass, once more not a rustler was in sight. Up in the rocks, without a doubt, or high-tailing it out of the valley, leaving their tools right where they had dropped them. Lockhart, the Wild Bunch, and his whole pack of followers had fied when they heard of their coming; but as they rode up past the house the bride stepped out, smilling, and once more Johnny doffed his hat.

"Oh, good-morning!" she said. "Why, where have all the men gone?"
"Never mind them," rasped Bear Paw. "We have come to see your

"Why—he just left—last night. Can I do anything for you? Won't you all come in and sit down?"

"Nope—too busy," rumbled Barr, with a suspicious look around. "When do you expect Mr. Lockhart back?"

"Oh, you're safe," said McDonald, by the way of breaking a long silence; and sourred up into the lead.

"Ssstt!" he hissed, nudging Barr with his knee; and they rode away up the canyon. "What the hell?" he cursed, as they stopped to talk it over; and Bear Paw glanced at Kew.

"What do you think, Johnny? Was she lying?"

"Oh, no," he answered. "Old Grif has stepped out on her. Up in the rocks, watching, is my guess."

"Are you game to go down there and talk to the little lady, or do you feel the need of assistance? It's necessary to find out where that scoundrel has gone to and I don't feel quite up to it, myself."

scoundrel has gone to and I don't feel quite up to it, myself."
"No, nor me either," growled McDonald. "Knowing what I know, and
what kind of a man she's married to, I can't even look her in the eve."

"No," agreed Johnny, and sat his horse in silence. "She's a pretty girl," he said. "but-"

"But what?" spoke up Barr at last.

"Oh, nothing," grumbled Kew. "Only I've seen her type before. Well, all right, I'll go back and talk with her."

"Look as much like a Christ-picture as possible," advised Uncle Charley, "But get me the news-where he is."

"Yes, sir," responded Johnny, riding away; and Bear Paw glanced at his companion.

"Been a soldier, eh?" he said; and McDonald nodded.

"He won't admit it," hinted Barr.

"No difference," stated Sandy, "it puts a mark on 'em. Ought to be a good hand with women."

"Never gives 'em a second look," sighed Uncle Charley. "But Engracia is right fond of him."

"Oh, well," shrugged Sandy, "She's just a girl yet. Mighty pretty girl, though," he added.

"Yes," agreed Bear Paw. "That's the trouble. The boys are beginning to notice her. But not him—I'll say that. Not in that way, anyhow. Some girl has turned him down once—he's wise."

The wise young Johnny Kew rode back very circumspectly and, when the young lady smiled, his grim eyes never changed. He was watching her. "What's the matter?" she laughed. "Have you got that way, too? All these young cowboys seem afraid to speak to me. I can see they're actually scared."

"They're scared about something," he agreed, and glanced at the vacant corrals.

"Why, yes," she murmured. "They've all gone, haven't they? Are you one of Mr. Barr's men?"

"Oh, yes," he answered, and looked up at the rocks.

"Are you scared, too?" she asked.

"No," he shrugged. "I haven't got sense enough. But there's certainly something funny going on." $\,$

"What is it?" she demanded breathlessly.

"Well," he said, "I might as well tell you. Your husband may be a jolly good fellow, and all that; but at the same time he might not like it to find somebody talking to his wife."

"Oh! Oho!" she crowed, pointing her finger at him accusingly. "So that's what's the matter? He's jealous! We've only been married a few days and I haven't found that out yet. It was really a very romantic affair—one of these whirlwind courtships you read about—and I guess I've got several things to learn."

"Very likely," he admitted; "and my advice is not to try getting acquainted until your husband comes back—has he gone down into Mexico?"

He cued it in so casually that the lady took the bait.

"Oh, maybe he has!" she exclaimed. "He's gone off somewhere with those six cowboys he always takes. Is that the place he goes to get cattle?"

"Yes!" he nodded and she ran on, garrulously.

"He came into Kansas City with two whole trainloads, and that's a lot of cattle, Oh, thousands and thousands—my uncle is a buyer and he told me all about them. They had a Diamond Bar brand on the hip, you know; and then lots of them had a hair brand. Do you know what that is? I don't."

"It's a brand that's just burned in the hair when they're starting over the trail. A kind of temporary brand, you know." He was too polite to say it was used principally by rustlers; but she wouldn't have heard him, anyway.

"Oh, yes," she ran on, without listening to him. "I don't know much

about the cattle-business, yet. But when he got his pay he was certainly free with the money. I never saw anything like it. You know I worked in a store and never had any good times except when Uncle Eph entertained cattlemen. That was how I came to meet Mr. Lockhart. Well, it seemed to be a case of love at first sight because the very first night, at a swell cafe, he bought me a hundred dollars worth of orchids!"

She paused and smiled dreamily, but Johnny said nothing.

"He bought me everything," she continued. "And when he asked me how I would like to marry a cattleman and live on a ranch in the West I simply couldn't resist him."

"No," said Kew. "Very few women could. But I'll have to be going on."

"Oh, no!" she protested. "I'm so lonely! And nobody here to talk to. How do you like my new dress—it's part of my trousseau!"

She raised the skirt of a gorgeous silk house-dress a little higher than was necessary and Johnny regarded it approvingly.

"Very pretty!" he pronounced and she raised it a trifle higher.

"But you're looking at my legs!" she cried out accusingly, and went off into throaty laughter. "Oh, I saw you!" she said. "I guess all men are the same. Won't you come up and see me, sometime? I've got two trunkfuls of clothes, just as pretty as this, and not a soul to show them to. These boys around here seem to be pretty slow—are you a college boy, or something? I think it's so romantic, out here in the Wild West, with everybody wearing guns and pistols."

"Yes, it is," he assented, looking back for Barr and Sandy. "When do you expect Mr. Lockhart back?"

"Oh, any time," she answered recklessly. "Or maybe not for a week. Come on in—just for a minute!"

She opened the door enticingly but he shook his head.

"Not for a million dollars," he said laughingly. "You don't know what a jealous husband you've got."

He reined away and spurred off down the trail, his mouth twisted into a crooked smile.

Chapter IX

"ELL, how does she stack up?" demanded Bear Paw, when he finally caught up with Kew. "I never knew, Johnny, what a ladies' man you were—didn't you see her waving her hand at you?" -

"No!" he declared; and the two old Rangers laughed at him.

"It's a gift," observed McDonald oracularly.

"What's the news about Lockhart?" broke in Barr, as he saw his young gunman flush up. "Gone to Mexico, hey—with those same six rustlers. Don't you know, Sandy, I believe that's a gang—they always stick together. Bunch of train-robbers or something, hiding out across the Line. But dam' 'em, they always come back."

"He'll be back," agreed McDonald, "with that young bride of his waiting. Ain't she a stunner, with that fancy silk dress on? A little loud though, maybe, for some."

"Not for him," came back Bear Paw. "He likes 'em that way. But don't take too much for granted, Just because old Grif wasn't present, that don't prove he wasn't up in the rocks—with that rifle of his held on Johnny all the time, ready to protect the sanctity of his home."

"And I believe he was, too," Kew nodded solemnly. "Don't ask me to go up there any more. I can think of other and more pleasant ways of dying than shot through the back over her."

"You don't like her then, Johnny?" suggested McDonald; and Bear Paw shook his head warningly.

"That'll do now," he said. "Don't carry a joke too far. We asked him to go down there; and he went, like a gentleman. Can he help it if she waves her hand?"

"Certainly not!" replied Sandy, and let it go at that; but they hadn't seen the last of her, yet.

Two mornings later, when the Rangers were away and Johnny was breaking horses in the corral, she came down the road in her going-away suit behind the spanking team of grays. And beside her, holding the reins but not looking very happy, was a long-legged, weak-chinned cowhov. Kew ducked down out of sight, they passed through the east gate; but, when they swung around the house and out towards the north gate, they stopped and Mrs. Lockhart got out. Johnny heard her up at the house, and Mrs. Barr answering in Spanish; then the patter of feet and Engracia came running to get him. They were standing in the doorway, Mrs. Barr's face a blank; while Mrs. Lockhart, brushing back her veil, was waiting for him helplessly.

"Oh, here you are!" she cried, suddenly flashing a dizzy smile. "I came down to call, being so lonely and all, and she can't speak a word of English. Is she a Mexican woman, or what?"

A look of black hate swept over the Señora's handsome countenance, and Johnny took her guest off her hands.

"No—Spanish," he said. "She doesn't talk much with strangers. Come on out to the *ramada*—Mr. Barr will be back soon, and that's where he always sits."

He led the way out to the lookout and, as she sank down in a chair, Mrs. Lockhart burst out laughing.

"I felt so funny!" she exclaimed. "She can't speak a word, eh? But what a bright little daughter"—she glanced approvingly at Engracia— "I suppose she learned English from her father."

"Yes," said Johnny, grimly; and spoke briefly in Spanish, at which Engracia flounced into the house. She had a frank way of speaking and he had caught her just in time, judging from the look in her eye.

"And so your name is Johnny," observed the lady. "My name is Salome—Salome Lockhart. But what's your last name. Johnny?"

"That is something," he responded gravely, "that we never ask in this country, where most of us are under a flag. You can call me Mister Kew."

"Why, that's just a letter!" she exclaimed.

"Yes. That's why I took it," he answered, and lapsed into sullen silence.

"Oh, Wayne!" she called down to the driver. "Come up here just a minute. I want to introduce you to Mr. Q. He's working for Mr. Barr."

She waved young Mr. Davis to a seat—where he sat with his eyes fixed upon her like a frightened but fascinated rabbit—and ran on with a line of small talk that left him in a sweat.

"I got so lonesome up there," she declared, "I just had to see somebody and go somewhere! So I just made Mr. Davis drive me down here for a call. Not so much to see Mrs. Barr and you as to get out of that terrible canyon—and right up there by the gate, when we passed, Wayne showed me where two men had just been killed."

"What?" cried Johnny, leaping up; and he was halfway down the hill when her shrill laughter brought him to a halt.

"Last week! Last week!" she called after him; and Davis finally found his voice.

"Them Mexicans!" he croaked; and Kew came back in a fury.

"Be a little more careful what you say," he said. "Mr. Barr and Sandy McDonald are out riding."

"Oh, are you really afraid," she quavered, "that somebody might be killed? I thought it was all a joke."

"No," he answered. "It's a serious matter, and there's really nothing to laugh at. Did you see them—along the fence?"

"Who?" demanded Salome. "Mr. Barr and that man with a moustache? Well, I should say not—we didn't see anybody. But if you're going to be so touchy I'm going to Yermo. There isn't a thing to eat in the house, and I'm going to order and order and order. I don't care! If my husband is going to go off and leave me I'm going to have a good time. Invite the cowboys over and have some wienies and beer. Wouldn't you like to come up?" she invited.

"Well—no," he said. "Your husband is not a personal friend of mine and he might not understand."

"Really?" she inquired. "Have you had trouble with Grif? Why, what were you quarreling about?"

"I'll let Mr. Lockhart explain the details," he replied. "But if you're going to Yermo and back today you'd better be hitting the road."

"Who said anything about coming back?" she laughed; and Davis stopped in his tracks.

"I—I've got to get back!" he stuttered and she jabbed him with her elbow as she passed.

"Oh, don't be a kid!" she said. "What's the matter? Are you afraid of the dark?"

"No!" he declared, and followed after her laughing; striding fast on bis long, weedy legs.

Chapter X

JOHNNY Kew sat at his ease under the brush ramada, watching a line of dust racing along towards Yermo with a team of grays at its point

"Drive, you damned fool!" he said. "Burn up the road—and if you're not home by dark—"

He paused, for Engracia had stepped out the gate and was watching him intently.

"What are you laughing at?" she demanded, as he rose up and offered her a chair.

"Mr. Davis is in a hurry," he observed; and she fixed him with her velvet-black eyes.

"But what is there funny about that?" she asked.

"Well, it's a long way to Yermo and back, and if Lockhart's wife isn't home by dark—"

"Then what will happen? Tell me."

"Who knows?" he responded, slipping back into Spanish. "Perhaps the boss will kill him."

"But why?" she insisted.

"Well," he explained, "it's an old Spanish custom—you don't need to look at me like that! Well, for making love to his wife."

"And do you love her, too?" she burst out, tremulously; and he rolled his eyes reprovingly.

"No, Engracia. Don't you ever think it! I knew a girl just like her, once. Little eyes, little nose, little mouth—"

"Don't you think she's a good girl?" ventured Engracia; and he glanced towards the house for help.

"Well, I hope so," he said at last. "There's one thing about her—she doesn't ask many questions. But I don't like to see a married woman with that particular look in her eye."

"What look? I want to know."

"It is called in the books a come-hither look. Helen of Troy was one of the first to use it, and it's been making trouble ever since. Now never mind how I know that, or who Helen of Troy was. Just keep right on being a good little girl—"

"I'm not a little girl!" she came back hotly.

"—and you and I can be friends. Otherwise your father is going to run me off the ranch and—"

"I'm not a little girl!"

"Then be a good girl," he suggested; and the wild light went out of her eyes.

"Are you going away?" she pouted, as he rose up hastily.

"Down where your father is," he said; but as he met her eyes he smiled.

She was a beautiful creature, this Engracia, and as he gazed at her he realized that she had suddenly grown up and could no longer be treated like a child. When she wore the long riding-habit which her mother insisted upon she looked almost like a grown woman, but at heart she was still a little girl.

"I'll go with you!" she cried, jumping up.

"No." he said, glancing over towards the gate; and she saw her mother, watching them. The Señora was still angry over her encounter with Salome and, without tempting the lightning, Johnny strode down the hill and rode out to meet her father. But before he got around to speak about Salome the team of grays appeared, dashing down the road from Vermo in a mad race to get home before dark.

"What's the matter?" barked Barr, throwing the spurs into his horse; but Kew flagged him down to a walk.

"Let 'em pass," he advised. "I came out to tell you—Mrs. Lockhart just made a neighborly call and your wife is too mad to talk."

Bear Paw's steely blue eyes narrowed as he listened to the details, but when Davis flung open the gates and sped on up the wash—he leaned back in his saddle and laughed.

"So that's the kind of woman she is! I felt sorry for the poor girl at first but—well, I believe she'll break Grif, yet. Keep him so busy looking after her he'll let the rustling business go. I'll bet you he's up in those rocks, right now, watching the road with blood in his eye. Gad, what a chance that Davis boy is taking! And he knows it, too, the poor fool. You were wiser than we thought, boy, when you never looked back—and her waving her hand all the time."

"Yeah!" nodded Kew. "She's a natural-born flirt—I knew that the first time I laid eyes on her."

"Stay away from her," advised Barr. "You're a good boy, Johnny—I'm beginning to like you—and she's out to get you killed. You or anybody else that's crazy enough to go up against her husband."

"He's a bad one-I ought to know that."

"Yes, but here's something maybe you didn't know. McDonald is wise to that 'uncle' of hers that married her off to Grif. He makes a business of going through the big stores and picking up these 'nicces.' Pretty girls that want to have a good time and are just barely making a living—and he'll talk to them something like this.

"'How would you like to marry a rich cattleman and live on a big ranch in the West? All right then, you're my niece. Here's a hundred dollars to buy some nice clothes—and you can leave the rest to me. I'm a cattle-buyer, savvy, and meet them every day; and all you've got to do when the right one asks you to marry him is to remember what I say. You've got a poor, hard-working mother to help and there's a mortgage on her home. Maybe a thousand dollars—maybe more—depending on how easy he is. And that mortgage has got to be paid. First! O.K., when he slips you that thousand dollar bill you pass it on to me. That'll pay me for being your uncle.'"

"Uhrr!" grunted Johnny. "So that's the way she worked it."

"That's the racket," stated Barr. "Sandy knows all about it. They tried to work it on him once, when he took a load back to K.C. But here's a case where they both got stung. She not only married a rustler, with nothing but what he can steal, but a regular, damned murderer, to boot—a man capable of anything—a man who would kill her like that! And he, it turns out, has hooked up with a woman that just has to flitt with every man. There's dynamite for you, and she don't know a thing about it. Still thinks she can play horse with him—wrap him around her little finger."

He spread out his hands, Mexican fashion, shrugged his shoulders, shook his head.

"If that hasn't got the makings of a little hell—" he began; and left the rest unsaid.

Chapter XI

I'll next morning there was a steady procession of wagons, delivering goods up Pilares canyon—a phonograph, groceries, furniture, beer—everything that Salome could think of. And every day she drove down to order more. She was living in a kind of shop-girl's paradise, giving orders where before she had taken them, and all in the grand manner of a duchess. But, though she wore a new hat every day and the most elegant dresses in her trousseau, Mrs. Barr never opened her door and Salome understood.

But with Engracia and Dolores it was different. They lingered by the gates to watch her goings and comings and stare at her pretty clothes, to observe her ways with Wayne Davis and the coquettish smiles with which she lured him on. But when Engracia began to practice these wiles she was called into the house by her mother and forbidden even to look. She was learning before her time the ways of another world, but nothing could be done about it.

Johnny Kew got into the habit of riding away at dawn and coming back just before dark, and in spite of all protests he moved down into an adobe and took his meals with the Mexicans. He had his horses to guard while they fed on the grassy plains, and Bear Paw stopped and talked for hours. As for McDonald, he was restless, but he still stayed on in the hope that the rustlers would return.

It was to shoot it out with Grif Lockhart and his gang that he had left his big ranch in Arizona, but the presence of Salome had postponed their showdown, though she had only put it off. Sandy watched her drive by every day, still marvelling at her nerve and the fool's paradise she was living in—and she repaid his admiring glances with a smile. But there came a morning when she did not drive by—and there was a dust-cloud to the south.

Barr focused his telescope and looked a long time—then he nodded his head and smiled.

"That's him," he announced. "I'd know that black horse anywhere. All right, Sandy—you get your wish."

McDonald closed one eye and peered through the spy-glass before he cracked a smile.

"You're right," he said. "And he's got a big bunch of cattle—every one stolen, of course. I just want to see if that rascal will fight—been waiting around for a month."

"He'll fight," promised Barr, "if we crowd him. But at the same time he'll crawl if he can. All he wants is to water his cattle at my well—because that lake-water would alkali every one of them—and get by up the canyon. He may run a big bluff, but he'll have to sing low to talk me into letting him pass."

"All right," challenged Sandy. "What then?"

"I'm going to cut that herd and take out every stray. After that he can go his way."

"Wha-at?" shrilled McDonald. "What you want to do that for? Didn't he steal a big bunch the last time he went through here? Stand up to him! Give him hell!"

"That isn't my system," explained Barr. "If I put up a fight every time a bunch of rustlers came through I wouldn't last a year. I'm a family man, Sandy—"

"A-all right," agreed Sandy, with a gusty sigh. "But I still think your system is wrong. I've tried it both ways and it's been my experience that there's only one system that works. Shoot it out with 'em right now, before they get their hooks in. Give 'em hell, the first rattle out of the box."

"You may get a chance to demonstrate," responded Bear Paw; and went into get his spare gun.

"What do you think?" barked Sandy, turning impatiently on Johnny.

"Or is this a little out of your line?"

"Well—yes and no," evaded Kew. "I'm just staying on to help out."
"You're a fighting-man hey? You don't look it. Had any experience

"Enough," shrugged Johnny, "so I can take care of Mr. Lockhart. What's this, coming down the wash?"

He turned at the rattle of wheels over rocks and ran nimbly down to the gate. Salome was driving the grays alone and holding them just short of a runaway.

"What's the matter?" he asked as they came to a stop before they crashed the gate; and she threw down the lines and jumped out. "Wayne!" she cried. "He's gone!"

"Never mind!" blared McDonald from behind. "Here comes your husband, up the valley with his cattle. Maybe he will kinder take Wavne's place."

She had thrown herself dramatically into Johnny's arms, but at this she ierked away again.

"You mind your own business!" she shouted; and gave Sandy a hateful look. Then, as she saw the cloud of dust, she drew back and gazed at Kew with frightened eyes.

"Is he coming?" she gasped. "Mr. Lockhart? Oh, Johnny, I'm afraid."

"You don't need to be," stated Barr, coming down to join them. "We'll take care of your lovely husband."

"But he might not understand," she quavered. "And Wayne has gone away."

"Yeh!" grinned Sandy. "He must've had a hunch. You'll never see him again."

"But why not?" she clamored, and looked wildly around before she cast herself into Kew's arms again.

"Won't you take me away?" she pleaded. "I never knew, until you told me, how terribly jealous he is."

"Not necessary!" announced Barr, barging in. "And besides, I need Johnny right now. You go up to the house and Mrs. Barr will take care of you."

"No!" she flared back, striking his hands away. "I guess I can take care of myself. But why did Wayne run away? And those other men—they were afraid to touch me!"
"lust a natural reluctance." explained Bear Paw blandly. "to be seen

with another man's wife. And especially holding her in his arms."

He cleared his throat and glanced at Johnny, who instantly took the hint; but even then a little too late.

"I can tell you," screamed Engracia, crowding in and pushing her away from him, "they're afraid your husband will kill them."

"That'll do, now!" warned Barr, as Salome's eyes widened; but Engracia was beyond control.

"The way he did down in Mexico," she went on. "When his first wife was alive."

"Why-what does she mean?" cried Salome, swaying back into

Johnny's arms, "Has he been married before? He never said a word about it!"

Inhany glanced at the Rangers and blushed

"I might as well tell you," he said. "Mr. Lockhart has been married before."

"And did he kill some man over her?" she quavered; and Kew nodded grimly.

"Oh!" she moaned, and went limp in his arms; at which Barr promptly picked up her feet.

promptly picked up her feet.

"She's fainted," he announced. "Take her up to the house, boys. I

wonder what she'd do if she knew what we know about her husband?"

He shut up abruptly, for Salome had opened her eyes. But this time
she really did faint.

Chapter XII

Bear Paw rang the big bell, his Mexicans came charging and lined up at the gate, where he gave them their orders in Spanish. Then he sat back regally in his rawhide chair and waited for the rustlers to approach. They were having trouble keeping their cattle away from the lake, where one big bellyful of alikali water would just about finish them off; but Lockhart had picked up some more American cowboys and they finally swung them east. Then the leaders caught the smell of the Bear Paw tanks and headed north at a lumbering trot.

There was no time to be lost if the gate was to be opened and Lockhart came up the hill at a gallop, with the Wild Bunch close behind. "Open that gate!" he velled, "and open it quick, Never mind all that

"Open that gate!" he yelled, "and open it quick. Never mind all that stuff about asking permission. My cattle are dead for water—and I've got a way of getting what I want."

He slapped the holster of his pistol and Barr snapped up his rifle.

"Yes?" he mocked. "Well, I've got a way of keeping it."

He raised one hand in a signal and, out from the garden, Sandy McDonald ambled forth with the light of battle in his eye. His big teeth were skinned vindictively, he was weighed down with a heavy pistol and held a high-powered rifle ready to shoot. Sandy's big moment had come and he gave them a look that made their blood run cold.

"That's right," Barr said to him. "Look 'em over. Every man guaranteed to be a train-robber or worse, with a big reward on his head. This is Sergeant McDonald of the Texas Rangers and he'll shoot the doll-rags out of you, the first man that bats an eye."

Sandy stood at his ease, looking them over expectantly, and Bear Paw began to laugh.

"Uhr!" he sneered, throwing down on Lockhart, "so you've got a way with you, eh? Well, go ahead, Mister, and show us that way." "Yes." added Sandy. "Glad to see it."

They waited a long moment, and Barr suddenly turned on the Wild

"Get over there, you!" he blared out insultingly. "Over to one side, where you won't get hurt—you ain't as bad as you look."

They moved, all right—all except a stranger, wearing Pancho Villa leggings, who had not been noticed in the scuffle. He was a handsome young fellow, with a long rifle on his saddle and a bunch of yellow curls under his hat. He sat his horse with nonchalant ease and favored Barr with a boyish grin.

"What is this?" he inquired. "An arrest or a hold-up? I just tagged along with these gentlemen, making my get-away out of Mexico."

"You go over there," pointed Bear Paw, "while I talk to these mugs. You may be all right, but you're caught in bad company. Now, Mr. Lockhart, you get down on your knees and ask for this water or you'll never get a drop. And if you and your pardners want to try that other way you spoke of—"

He paused and in the silence there came the sound of running cattle and the crash as they slammed against the gate.

"Well," said Lockhart, "I was kinder excited. My cattle are awful dry and I've got to get them water. So, would you mind opening that gate and letting them have a drink?"

"How do I know they're your cattle? Have you got a bill of sale? You put them through my corrals and I'll cut that herd down to your road-brand. I've sent to Yermo for the cattle inspector."

"Oh hell!" wailed Grif. "I can't stop for that."

"And the sheriff," added Barr.

"Let 'em drink," pleaded Lockhart, "and I'll cut out every Bear Paw I've got."

"You'll do that anyway," came back Bear Paw, "or lose one of them buttons off your vest. You might not have noticed, but here's an old friend of your that's had you covered all the time."

He nodded, and Johnny Kew stepped out from behind the fence with a 30-30 in his hand.

"Yes," he said, looking them over. "Seems like all you fellers do is talk. This is the third time, as I remember, that you've—"

He paused as his eyes fell on the strange young man, who was regarding him with a fixed smile

"Hello, Johnny," he said with a jovial wink. "You here? I thought you were dead."

"Nope," answered Kew, stepping over to shake hands with him. "Say,

Mark, I've got those horses down here."

He waved a hand toward the *palomillos*, which were shut up in a horse-pen below: and Mark broke into a laugh.

"The hell!" he exclaimed. "Did you get 'em across the Line alone?

Well, all right, Johnny—they're yours, then."
"No!" declared Kew. "We were pardners in everything, and I say
one half of them are yours. I was just waiting around, half boning you'd

show up."

"Well, I might take one then, from an old *compadre*. But I went off and left you, and if you brought 'em out alone—"

He stopped and looked towards the house, and every eye followed his gaze. Salome came staggering out of the door, supported by the Señora and Engracia; but when she saw her husband she thrust them aside and marched towards him, her eyes ablaze. But if she had intended to upbraid him she changed her mind when he grabbed her and demanded a kiss. In his old, greasy clothes, with a month's growth of beard on his face, he was a far call from the dandy she had known—and his seys were hard—hard!

"Let go of me!" she pleaded, trying to shake off his grip. "Oh, I could kill you for what you've done to me! You liar! I know all about you!" She glared at him contemptuously, but his bloodshot eyes blazed back

at her until suddently she was afraid.
"Here here!" he respect holding her tighter; and as she fought him

"Here, here!" he rasped, holding her tighter; and as she fought him he shook her like a child. "Don't you shake me!" she cried in a tantrum. "So you're a cowthief, are you? I thought you were a rich cattleman. And where's that wonderful ranchhouse you were going to give me? It's nothing but a log shack!"

"Never mind about the house—we'll take care of that, later. But what were you doing, hiding out in this house here? These people are no friends of mine!"

"She fainted," explained Mrs. Barr, in perfect English, "when she found out what kind of a man she had married. Oh!" she cried, as Salome closed her eyes; and caught her before she could fall.

"Oh, oh!" exclaimed Mark, as Lockhart stood gawking; and swung down to take her in his arms. He was a bold young man and as he gazed at her admiringly her lips parted and she smiled. Then she closed her eyes again, settled her head against his breast, and sighed.

"Ketch hold here, Parson," directed Mark, turning to Kew. "A maiden in distress-let's take her into the house."

"You leave my wife alone!" shouted Lockhart, suddenly coming out of his trance. "I know her—she can faint that way any time."

"All the same," grinned Trumbull, "we do the honors, eh, Johnny? A damned pretty girl, if you ask me."

He started towards the gate, shouldering Lockhart out of the way, and turned suddenly as the rustler made a move. Then his big pistol came out, he rammed it into Grif's belly and looked him in the eye.

"What's this, now?" he demanded. "Are you going to strike a woman?"

He gave Lockhart such a shove with his gun-muzzle that he nearly knocked him over backward, and Barr began to laugh.

"Take her in, boys," he said. "Into the guest-room, Johnny. And you," he went on, turning to Grif, "you can call for your wife in the morning."

"I'll take her right now!" declared the rustler; but Bear Paw shook his head.

"You'll take her in the morning—if she's willing," he said. And Lock-hart retired in a huff.

Chapter XIII

BIP LOCKHARY'S nerve was broken, he was trembling like a leaf;
and Barr was almost sorry for him, though he rode him to the
limit. This was the man who had crashed his gate three times
and watered his cattle without paying a cent; but the shame of being
deprived of his wife had left him in a daze.

"Here, now!" began Bear Paw, tapping the rustler on the chest, "it's time you and I had a reckoning. The last time you went through here you ran off my cattle. Now you're trying to run off some more."

"Til pay you back," promised Lockhart. "You can trim my herd clean and keep every stray you ketch. But listen, Mr. Barr, I want my wife."

"What you want and what you get are two different things with me

-especially when you try to strike her. That don't go in this country-"
"I'll never lay hands on her again," begged Lockhart. "I'm sorry-"

"We can talk that over later," cut in Bear Paw. "What about those cattle down there? They're stolen, and I know it, but I'm going to let

you water them if you ask for it like a gentleman. If you don't, by grab, I'm going to seize the whole herd and turn them over to the sheriff."

"I'm asking you," quavered the rustler, "jest as polite as I can—and

"I'm asking you," quavered the rustler, "jest as polite as I can—and I'm willing to pay you, to boot. But don't keep my wife away from her husband."

"You'll pay me nothing!" declared Barr. "But get this through your head. Just because I haven't killed you or selzed your stolen stuff, don't think I'm noways afraid. And Sergeant McDonald here is just r'aring to clean up on you—"
"I am that!" nodded McDonald; but Lockhart never gave him a

chance. Hanging his head before the saturnine grins of the Rangers he agreed to everything they said; and once more the bars went down. The cattle fought their way over them, filling up till they almost burst; and before Barr let them pass out he cut the herd down to the trail brand. At last, worn out and humiliated, Lockhart drove what was left up the wash and the Rangers called it a day.

"We've got him on the run," exulted Bear Paw, "and we'll laugh him

out of the country. His own men are ashamed to be seen with such a bastard. Offering to strike a woman, the rascal."

"You're getting soft, Charley," scoffed McDonald. "A feller like that has got no pride. Every time the scoundrel comes here you let him talk you out of it. Shoot hell out of him—that's the way."

"But he crawls on me," complained Uncle Charley. "I can't kill a man

"No, and you'll keep on fooling with him and letting him bunco you, until he turns around and shoots you. But who's this boy, Mark, that's so quick on the draw? That's the kind of man we could use!"

"Yes," assented Bear Paw, but Trumbull had disappeared as mysteriough as he had come. They located him at last, down in Johnny Kew's
adobe, talking over the war in Mexico; but not until daylight the next
morning did the two compadres come out of their house. Then, both
carrying their rifles, they ran up on the hill-slope and looked away to
the east.

"It's him," declared Trumbull as the buckboard came in sight, rattling noisily over the rocks. "Look at the crazy fool, chasing down here to get his wife before anybody is up. But she don't feel that way about him. What say we take her away from him, the Pancho Villa way? And if he says anything—give him the works. I talked to the little lady last night for a minute, and she seemed to be halfway willing."

"Nope," answered Kew. "You can count me out on that. All except the shooting, of course. I'm sorry for the girl, but she sold herself to him with the idea that she was marrying a rich cattleman—and that's something I can't stand."

"Why, Parson!" reproached Mark. "A holy guy like you! Can't you see she's only a kid? She just made a mistake—you might have made one yourself. And look at the big slob, with a month's growth of beard, expecting her to rush out and kiss him! You can't blame her for hiding in the house—but I know how to handle him. Take the girl away from him and give him the horse-laugh. They ain't one in a hundred of these outraged husbands that's got the guts to fight."

He looked over his shoulder at the sound of running footsteps and Salome stopped beside him, panting.

"Ain't that so, Sister?" he grinned, putting his arm around her, non-chalantly. "I was just telling the Parson how we handle men like him, down in Mexico."

He drew her closer and she glanced up at him absently, then gazed away up the road.

"Yeah!" he went on, "men that don't appreciate their wives. You don't need to be afraid of this human gorilla that's coming to drag you away. I'm only a poor soldier-of-fortune, in wrong on both sides of the Line, but if you need a little protection—"

She looked at him strangely and shook her head.

"No," she said. "He's my husband—I married him. Are you married, Mr. Trumbull?"

"Who—me?" laughed Mark. "I don't need to be, Sister, as long as other men have got wives. I learned how to handle jealous husbands, taking towns with Pancho Villa. The Mexicans have a way."

She stared at him, startled out of her preoccupation. Then her eyes changed at some daring thought and a deep blush mounted her cheeks.

"Eh, Parson?" he leered. "The Villa system."

"You'd better let go of her," warned Kew, "unless you want to get killed. Mr. Lockhart has got a reputation."

"You shut up!" snapped Salome, spitefully; but Trumbull removed his hand.

"Huh, huh!" he grunted and grinned disarmingly as Grif dashed up to the gate. It took only a glance to tell that here was a husband in a rage—the very type of man Mark had boasted he could tame—but instead he stepped aside. Lockhart threw down his reins and came storming up the hill, where Salome awaited him, coolly. After her fainting and near-fainting, her mute glances and clinging appeals; when it came to the scratch she faced her husband without the blink of an eye.

"So!" he snarled. "Flirting around with them all, eh? If I ketch that Wayne Davis I'm going to kill him."

"I just asked him to drive for me," she defended. "Did you expect me to stay in that old, broken-down house until my husband came

"Docks" "Docks all the time and—"

"Good morning, Mr. Lockhart," broke in Bear Paw, stepping blithely in on the scene, "I was just coming up to your place,"

"Well, you stay away," he came back. "And keep out of my affairs. Understand?"

"I'll do that," retorted Barr, "when you keep out of mine. But by the

gods, after promising to give me the moon, you picked up a lot of my cows last night and ran 'em off with your herd. I'll stand just so much of this rustler stuff, and then—"

"All right, I'll cut 'em back."

"You do so—right now—and keep that gate closed. There's a law in this state about cutting a man's fence, the way you did with that last herd—"

"Say!" yelled the rustler. "Are you trying to pick a fight with me? I came down here to git my wife, not to chew the rag with you—"

"There she is," said Barr, bowing politely to the lady. "But I reckon she understands she doesn't need to go unless she wants to."

"No, I'll go," decided Salome; with an odd smile at her husband.
"That is, if he wants me to and will promise to treat me right. But if he's going off for weeks at a time and leave me all alone—"

"No, I'll stay," he promised, meekly.

"Well, all right, then," she said and, putting her hand in his, she danced down to the buggy and drove off.

Chapter XIV

"West Lil" exclaimed Mark Trumbull, as he watched them drive off and Johnny Kew gave him the laugh. "So that's the way she feels!"

"She had her chance," said Barr.

"Yes," observed Kew, "and you might have noticed that she thought it over carefully. She sold herself to that man in the first place—like many another girl I've known—and she just went back to him for his money."

"Oh, is that it?" exclaimed Mark, taking off his gun-belt and opening up the money-belt inside it. "Well," he said, shaking out a handful of golden twenties, "in a case like that I could play a few stacks, myself."

"You'd better lay off," advised Barr, motioning Engracia back into the house. "In the first place the lady knows how to take care of herself and doesn't need any help from us. She's found out already he's nothing but a cow-thief, and never turned a hair. That shows she isn't too finicky. But there's one thing, Mr. Trumbull, we've all been keeping from her. Lockhart killed his first wife in her sleep—"

"-and her lover," added Kew. "He was with her."

"The hell you say!" exclaimed Mark; and Johnny could see his eyes burn. "But she don't know it yet?" he repeated.

"Not yet," returned Barr. "She's a pretty little thing, just out from the East, and no one had the nerve to tell her. That's why we've been trying to be nice to her."

"I—see," nodded Trumbull. "That's something else, again; and I'm not called in on this, at all. Well, no harm done—I'll ramble on to town and gaze at the great white lights. Goodbye, Parson—see you later."

He started down the hill to get his horse and Johnny followed after him.

"Better wait and have breakfast," he suggested; but Mark never broke his pace.

"Lost my appetite," he flung back and went his way, muttering, while Barr beckoned Kew to the *ramada*. But before he could express what was on his mind Engracia came running out.

"Who is that man?" she asked, clasping Johnny's hand and looking up at him anxiously; and he led her along, still smiling.

"An old friend of mine," he said at last. "He was a machine-gun man with Pancho Villa."

"And did he kill people, the way they do?"

"Yes," he admitted, "Mark has killed quite a few. In the line of duty, of course. It's a lucky thing for you, Boss," he went on, "that he decided to go to town instead of throwing in with those rustlers."

"That's what I wanted to talk over with you," began Barr; but Engracia was just getting started.

"I heard him talking with that lady last night," she hinted. "Do you think he really loves her?"

"Oh, yes," answered Johnny, and glanced at her father, who told her to go into the house. "He loves them all," went on Kew, as she left. "That's the trouble—and especially if they're married. He's Galahad himself with a maiden in distress, but these married men have got to look out. Not exactly the right thing for your daughter, Mr. Barr; and I was about to say, if old Mark stays around—"

"He's going to town," broke in Bear Paw, hastily, "and Engracia

has got to stay in the house. Sandy was saying he's just the man we need, if you think he'd take on as a gunman."

"Not a chance!" shrugged Kew. "That's too slow a job for him, and you probably noticed the money in his belt."

"Maybe it won't be so slow," suggested Barr, "if Lockhart lives up to his start. After meeching around like a whipped dog he got mean, on the way home, and stofe a lot more of my cows. Just threw them in while he was going up the wash—and I need another good, nervy man. It sure made me laugh, the way Mark got Lockhart's goat, jumping in and carrying off his wife; and at the first move Grif made out came Trumbull's gun and he claimed he was trying to strike her. Nothing of the kind, but he got Grif so badly rattled you could slap him down with a feather. How does your friend stand with the law?"

"He's agin it!" responded Johnny; and laughed.

"Been a soldier with Villa, eh? raiding one town after another and rounding up every woman in it. Maybe that's where he got his free and easy ideas about other people's wives."

"Very likely," agreed Kew. "I was just going to say, if you'd like me to go now—"

"No, by grab! I need you worse than ever."

"But Mark is my friend, We're kind of compadres. Anything I've got is his, and anything he's got is mine; and we'll stick together through hell."

"Just the boys I'm looking for!" declared Bear Paw heartily. "And so you were both machine-gun men with Pancho Villa? I didn't think you were that blooded, Johnny."

"Yes," admitted Kew. "We were soldiers out of hell for a while there. Just before I crossed the Line the Federals had us on the run, and Mark and I together held a pass, with our machine-guns, until Villa's men escaped. That's how I got hold of those palomillos—he gave 'em to us as a reward."

"Oh!" exclaimed Barr. "You didn't steal 'em, at all! Then what was your idea in keeping this so dark and giving me the idea you were a horse-thief?"

"I was out of my head for two or three days—and I didn't care what you thought, later. You seemed to take it for granted I was a horsethief or worse and I didn't want to deprive you of that pleasure. And then your wife and daughter saw a resemblance to that Christ-picture and I just had to live up to the part. After all, Christ was crucified between two thieves, and claimed them for his friends."

"Kew!" burst out Bear Paw. "Are you a minister, or something? I noticed Mark called you 'Parson'."

"Nope," said Johnny, "just another border renegade. But if you or your wife think I'm a menace to your daughter—or that Mark is, because he's my friend—"

"You stay!" commanded Barr, "and ask your friend to stay. Damned if I ain't beginning to like him, too. You stay and help get rid of Grif Lockhart and, by the gods, I'll never forget it. There's something about that boy, stepping, in right under Grif's nose and making love to his wrife, that shows he's a regular devil. It was bad enough for Lockhart, having Wayne Davis around, making eyes at his charming bride; but Trumbull has got him on the run."

"He's a terror!" laughed Kew. "Absolutely fearless—always hunting for trouble—and simply hell for stealing other men's women. And the fact that Grif Lockhart knocked me over the head, and ran off all our horses, just gives it the last, finishing touch. Mark is out to get him now, and the first false move he makes—

"I believe you," nodded Barr.

"He's no killer," protested Johnny. "Best-hearted boy you ever saw. He just goes through life looking for big bluffs like Grif and showing them up for what they are. It's a game with Mark, and he enjoys every minute of it. It's the element of danger that attracts him."

"Do you reckon he'll be back?" inquired Bear Paw. "Well, you tell your friend Mark to make his home right here and play that game all he wants to because Lockhart is out to clean me."

"He'll go the limit," warned Kew, and Uncle Charley shrugged.

Chapter XV

The day began with turmoil and strife, with drunken rustlers galloping past into town, and coming back the next morning, still drunk. They looked up at Bear Paw as they passed—and Sandy McDonald, sitting beside him—and went on, saying nothing. And

Uncle Charley let them go. They were just American cowboys, run out of Mexico by Villa and with no scruples one way or the other. Bare's quarrel was with Lockhart—and the sinister Wild Bunch that travelled with him but never did anything.

They looked bad, and stayed with him like a bodyguard; but, feeling a little out of place on the wrong side of the Line, they seemed satisfied to take a thinking part. But, though the second day had dawned
and Gril's cowboys were coming home, he had failed to bring back the
stolen cattle. He would pick them up, wherever he went, and throw
them into his herd, and so far not a cow had come back. He dritted
them north, while he guarded the trail behind—and once more Bear
Paw gave him rope. Sooner or later this rustler would hang himself, or
get tangled up in his slack.

The second morning came and McDonald was out for "War," but Uncle Charley had a hunch. And while he argued with Sandy he kept his eyes on the Yermo road—he was waiting for Trumbull to come back. The mere presence of Mark would throw Grif into a fury, whether he turned a hand or not; and, though he would not admit it, Barr felt the need of one more man—a man whose pleasure it was to show up big bluffs like Lockhart and make them back down or fight. But, while they were waiting, there was a dust up the wash and Salome came dashing down the road. From riding with Wayne Davis she had got the idea of driving the grays at a gallop. She came on in a sort of fury, but when she saw Johnny Kew she pulled up and beckoned him over.

He was out in the round corral with Capitan, the palomillo stud, who did not take kindly to being ridden, and after a glance he went on with his work. The stallion was a beautiful creature, with the head and neck of an Assyrian charger and amber eyes that glowed like fire, and Johnny had his hands full without dropping everything to obey her imperious summons. She was attired in a daring and expensive red dress, and her lips, painted orange, made her smile look ghastly—made her look the kind of woman she was.

"Just a minute!" he answered, when she called him; and rolled his eyes forbiddingly on Engracia, who had come running down to the corral. But Salome was in no mood to wait and, throwing her reins on the ground, she came flying, to climb up on the fence.

"I've got to go right back," she gasped, "before Mr. Lockhart misses me. But"—she blushed red—"where's Mark?" "In jail, I expect," he answered shortly. "He went into Yermo yesterday."

"Oh! Does he drink?" she asked; and Johnny showed his teeth sardonically.

"I rather liked him," she went on, haltingly; and Engracia edged in nearer.

"Yes," he said, "he rather liked you—until he saw you with your husband. Then he made up his mind he wasn't called in on it. I'll tell him that I saw you."

He reined the stud over and touched him with a spur and she sat on the top rail, watching him.

"Mr. Kew," she said at last. "What was that quarrel you had with my husband? He won't say a thing about it."

"Let it go, then," he shrugged; and as Salome sat pouting Engracia scrambled up heside her.

"I'll tell you," she offered. "Your husband hit Juanito over the head with his pistol and robbed him of all his horses."

"Juanito?" repeated Mrs. Lockhart.

"Yes. My Juanito, Mr. Kew."

"Oh!" murmured Salome, and dropped down off the fence in a flutter of silk and lace petticoats; but in a moment she was back again, smiling.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I was going to ask you if you wouldn't like to come up and call. Mark told me what a wonderful life you've had; and what friends you were, down in Old Mexico. I'm so sorry he's gone—I'm just dying to see him."

"You'd better forget it," he advised, "before something worse comes off. Mark gets kind of ugly when he's crossed, and he didn't like your husband."

"No," ran on Engracia, importantly. "Of course you didn't know, because you'd fainted. But he drew his big pistol and pushed it right against your husband's stomach, and he gave it a jab and knocked him right over. It made me laugh."

Salome drew down her lip and regarded her balefully before she decided to ignore her.

"When do you expect Mark back?" she asked. "I haven't got anybody to talk to, and I just doted on every word he said. Only I was so tired, and disappointed, and everything—I'm sure he understood. It's all so strange and unreal to me, out here in this Western country. I'd heard so much about the handsome cowboys and how polite they were to ladies, but why is it they all shy away from me so? Do you think they're really afraid? Are you afraid of Grif?"

"Well, maybe," he admitted; and Engracia laughed aloud.

"Oh, he is not!" she crowed. "He just hates old Grif. When Johnny first came to our house he was out of his head, and when he lay there he just cursed and cursed and called your husband everything."

"Yes," cut in Johnny. "And that's why Engracia's mother is thinking of sending her away. It is a bad moral atmosphere in which to bring up a little girl—"

"I'm not a little girl!" declared Engracia, hotly.

"Then don't talk like one," he said, and shut her up.

"Heh, heh," giggled Salome. "She's learning to swear, eh? Are you really expecting him back? I mean Mark Trumbull—are you?"

"Oh, yes. Sooner or later."

"Then will you tell him I want to see him?"

She blushed again, rosy red, and Engracia watched her, enviously. Sitting side by side, she was as big as Salome, but there the resemblance ceased. Mrs. Lockhart had on silk stockings and a clinging red dress which revealed every line of a figure that would do credit to a corset manikin. There was something about the slim, youtful legs, the slender body and high, full breasts that made even Johnny dizzy; and the look in her eyes as she waited for an answer made Engracias mouth grow hard. There was something about it she did not understand—and something else that she did. Tears came into Engracia's eyes and she gazed at him so pleadingly that Johnny was conscience-stricked.

He wanted to take her hand and tell her that never, never would he fall for Salome again. That this siren smile, directed at him, was intended for bold Mark Trumbull, who might or might not come back. But if he did come back, Salome wanted to see him—and the mere thought made her blush.

"Tll tell him," he said at last. But Salome would not go.

"You never told me," she went on, "what it is you're all afraid of. That is, if you are afraid. I just can't see what you're all so scared about. Why, since poor Wayne left I have to drive the team myself. I just know they're frightened about something."

Engracia gasped and nearly toppled over in her eagerness to get the first word.

"I'll tell you," she cried. "Your husband was married before, and he killed his wife in her sleep. And the man that was with her—he killed him, too. That's why these men are afraid."

"What?" screamed Salome, her eyes big and staring, her face strained and white with rage. "Why, you little devil!" she spat, and slapped her so hard that Engracia fell sprawling in the dirt. Then she ran back to her team and drove off up the road, lashing the horses at every step.

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Chapter XVI

RGRACIA had had her way at last and given Salome such a wound that she would probably never come back. But in working out her spite on her enemy she had been cut by the selfsame knife. Her mother had witnessed their encounter and heard her lay bare the secret they had all tried so hard to keep hid. Engracia had hardly scrambled up out of the dust when she was seized from behind and led back to the house, from which she did not emerge.

Kew sighed and went ahead taming his horses, while up at the lookout Uncle Charley and McDonald exchanged significant glances. "It would be a good time." suggested Sandy. "to make that little call

"It would be a good time," suggested Sandy, "to make that little call on Lockhart. By the time his wife gets through with him—"

"Nope," vetoed Barr, "he'd be so mad he'd fight a buzz-saw. Let her give him hell first and then, when he's cooled down—"

"You keep on waiting around—and watching that road for Trumbull
— you'll lose every cow you've got. How many men does it take to whip
this woman-killing bastard?"

"That ain't the point," insisted Barr. "I want to shame him—laugh him out of the country. We're getting old, Sandy, I never realized it till I saw this young Mark step in and take Grif's wife away from him. Pre-tending Grif was trying to strike her, and jabbing him in the belly with his six-shooter. We're all right for straight-away fighting, but that guy can pull it and laugh!"

"All right," sighed McDonald. "They're your cattle, not mine. But if you let him drive off this last bunch he stole he's going to be a hard man to head. He'll camp right down here, and cut your fences, and run off every cow-brute you've got."

"All the same," came back Bear Paw, "I'm going to wait right here and see how that young rascal works it. He's got a way of his own, that he might've learned from Pancho Villa, of getting these married men's goats. I just want to see him ride in on Gril Lockhart and take that girl away again. After that I can whip him with a stick."

They waited and when the husband-tamer appeared he seemed slightly the worse for wear. His eyes were half-closed, he nodded in the saddle and headed straight for Johnny Kew's house.

"Say," he complained, "who is that big tub-of-guts with the long black moustaches that has so much to say around Yermo? I got into a fight with the so-and-so and took his gun away."

"Oh, that's the town marshal," said Johnny; and Sandy McDonald laughed.

"I thought it was," grumbled Mark, "by the way the rest of them took after me. But a bunch of these rustlers stood 'em off and told me to go back to their camp. They're all on the dodge, so I'll be perfectly safe."

"All right," agreed Kew. "But you can stay here if you want to."

"Nope—drunk and disorderly. Got into a fight already. I'll go up and throw in with the Wild Bunch."

He rode on towards the east gate without looking back, and Johnny went up to the lookout.

"He's all right," he explained. "Just let him sleep if off. I'll go up, after a while, and bring him back—wouldn't put it past old Grif to murder him."

"We'll go with you," offered Bear Paw; and Sandy ran to saddle his horse.

The sun was swinging low when they rode up the wash, and at First Water they found Trumbull saleep. His big to nan stood over him, where he had stepped off and lain down in the brush, and at the first loud snort Mark opened his eyes—and his hand crept down towards his gun.

"H'lo," he grunted. "Wait a minute-I'll go with you."

He rose up wearily, washed his face in the creek and ran his fingers through his tangled yellow hair, which stood out around his head like an aurora borealis. Then he tightened up his cinch, waved the rest ahead and fell in behind, half asleep.

There was a big crowd of rustlers in front of Lockhart's house and, when they got closer, Johnny could see his Wild Bunch standing guard along the porch. But nobody moved—they were listening to a quarrel inside. First a deep, bass voice, then a throaty contralto—but Salome was doing most of the talking. Barr reined in to listen and glanced in-quiringly at McDonald, but Trumbull rode right into the crowd.

"What's the matter, boys?" he asked and, at the sound of his voice, Salome's scolding ceased. "Oh, fighting, eh?" he repeated. "What seems to be the trouble?"

He paused, for the door had swung open and Salome herself looked out. Her eyes were wild, her mouth clamped down angrily—and she whirled as Lockhart looked out over her head. Then the door was slammed shut, there was the noise of a scuille, and a woman's cry, shrill with terror.

"No! I didn't! I hardly spoke to him. Oh, please Grif; don't hurt my

"I'm not hurting you!" came back Lockhart with an oath; and Mark looked around at the rustlers.

"What's this?" he demanded, stepping off his horse. "Are you going to let him kill her, the way he did his first wife?"

He charged at the door without waiting for an answer, thrusting aside the big half-breed who tried to block his way. Then he stepped back a pace and kicked the door wide open, plunging in with his pistol raised. There was the sound of stamping feet, two men cursing at once and the sudden knock of Mark's six-shooter as he smashed Lockhart over the head with it.

"Take that!" he said, giving him another one for luck; and staggered out with Salome in his arms.

"Oh, save me!" she cried, as Grif rushed out after them, with blood streaming down his face. "Oh, don't let him kill me! O-oh! He-elp!"

"Stand back there!" ordered Mark, bringing his gun to a point; and Lockhart held up his hands.

"Grab him, boys!" shouted Trumbull. "He's got a knife on him, somewhere, the half-Mexican sin vergüenza."

"Honest, boys!" pleaded Grif, as the rustlers seized him. "I never

even offered to strike her. She smashed all that furniture herself, out of spite and to get me in wrong."

"I did not!" screamed Salome. "I was trying to defend myself. Oh, think of a man that would kill his wife in her sleep. Won't somebody lend me a nistol?"

"You don't need one," laughed Trumbull, "as long as I'm around. I know half these boys here, personally, and there ain't a man that wouldn't pull on the rope if—"

"That's right," yelled the rustlers in a chorus; and Grif began to beg. His own men had turned against him, the Wild Bunch was cowed again, and someone came running with a rope.

"Put it on him," directed Mark. "He'll get a fair trial, but short and to the point. I don't belong to your outfit and maybe it's none of my business, but she's too pretty a girl to be abused and maltreated by a drunken slob like him."

He jabbed Lockhart in the belly with his pistol again, and the crowd began to laugh. Mark winked and laughed back. Salome joined in and the Rangers came in on the chorus. "He's drunk!" charged Mark. "But we'll break him of beating his

wife if we have to take her away from him. Eh, Salome? How'd you like that? We'll make you the Rustler Queen!"

"O.K.," she answered, laughing and gazing up at him admiringly. "And you can be the Rustler King!"

"W'y, yes!" he said. "I never thought of that. How about it—do I get a kiss?"

"Well, not right now," she said, glancing teasingly at her husband; but Trumbull took it, anyhow.

"Come on!" he laughed. "Let's take her over to camp until her husband sobers up. And the first time he offers to raise a hand against her—"

"We'll kill him," yelled the crowd.

Mark put his arm around her waist and lifted her lightly to his shoulder.

"This calls for the drinks, boys," he bawled. "Go back to the house and get a bottle. A dozen bottles—what? Have you got some, Queen?"

"In the corner of the kitchen!" she called after them, and laughed until she cried.

"This is the life," she said, patting him lovingly on the cheek, "And I owe it all to you, Mark."

"Eh, hey!" he laughed. "And I was going north!"

"'Here's to the grape
The mother of wine
If you will be my love
I will be thine.
If you will be loving
I will be true
And make a happy home

Chapter XVII

For you,""

TELL!" observed Bear Paw as they sat their horses and watched the rustlers running with the booze. "This is as merry a scene-as I've witnessed in some time, but business is business, gentle-

men."

He turned to Grif Lockhart who, still wearing the rope, had been left unattended by the door; and the rustler chief shook his head groggily.

unattended by the door; and the rustler chief shook his head groggily.

"I give you my word of honor," he mumbled. "I never laid a hand on her Never!"

"No," jeered Barr. "It's too bad about you. Next thing you'll be telling me you never stole a cow, but I know a damsite better. It ain't the first time, either, that a pretty little woman has got the best of a big strong man. I didn't come up here to mix in your family affairs, but I did come to talk about cows. Two days ago you gave me your word of honor to bring back those Bear Paw cattle; but you didn't do it, Mr. Lockhart. So I've come up to get them, myself. Any objections, now is the time to make 'em."

"Go ahead and take 'em!" shouted Lockhart in a pet; and they rode on before he changed his mind. He was caught in a bad jam—his men had gone back on him—and Mark had carried off his wife. In a laughing way, of course, but Grif's head was laid wide open by two ugly swipes from a gun-barrel and he failed to see the joke. His rustler kingdom was falling—going to pieces before his eyes and all because Mark Trumbull had taken a fancy to his wife. A drunken soldier-of-fortune, one of Pancho Villa's raiders, a fighting fool on either side of the Line. Grif had thought he had got rid of him when he went in to Yermo, but here he was running everything.

"Come over, boys!" called Mark as Barr and the rest rode by, "Come over and drink to the bride—the prettiest damn girl in New Mexico. I'm thinking of stealing her, by grab!"

He was sitting in a circle of rustlers with his arm around her waist and Salome had forgotten all her woes. Even the fact that Grif had killed his former wife cast no shadow on her happiness.

"Yes! Yes!" she cried, flinging the dregs from a tin cup and holding it out for more wine; but Uncle Charley only laughed.

"Another time," he said, "when we're not quite so busy. But drink hearty—you'll only be young once!"

"Ain't it a fact!" she echoed, smiling radiantly; and Mark filled her cup with champagne.

"Well, hurry back," he said. "This ain't going to last long. And if you meet the sheriff, coming after me, you can tell him I'm right here."

He gathered her into his arms again and Salome gave him a slap, instantly followed by a kiss.

"What did I tell you?" demanded Bear Paw.

"Dead right," responded Sandy. "We're getting old, Charley. And the boy has got a way with him. That Pancho Villa must be a wonderful man, Mr. Kew."

"Certainly is," agreed Johnny. "And he thought the world of Mark, before he went to the bad."

"For a fight or a frolic, eh? Ever get in on any of that?"

McDonald was looking him over with his frosty blue eyes, but Johnny did not seem to mind.

"The fighting—yes," he nodded. "I'm not much for stealing other men's wives."

"But if Mark wants to do it?" suggested Sandy.

"O.K.," shrugged Kew. "We're compadres."

"You'd stand up for him, eh? Fight the sheriff?"

"Here, here!" broke in Bear Paw. "You leave Johnny alone. What is this—the third degree?"

"I'm just curious, Charley, if there's any of 'em left like we was, when we was young."

"Ump!" grunted Barr, "They can't be like that now and keep out of jail. But watch me steal a few cows. This son-of-a-goat Lockhart has been robbing me regular, ever since he came into the country. Here's his herd, boys—and cut 'em close. It's all stolen stock, so what's the difference? I'll speak to this gentleman first."

He headed his horse towards a scared-looking cowboy who seemed to be standing guard—the only man left of the day-herders—and he did not linger long. Bear Paw held up his hand in the peace-sign, but he still had that officer-look and the rustler left on the run. Then, competently and thoroughly, they cut out their stolen Bear Paws—and about a hundred more—and headed the bunch for how.

In their camp under the oaks along Pilares Creek the rustlers were merrier than ever, and it did Barr's heart good to see them. Men as carefree as that would not put up much of a battle to defend their scury chief. It was deuces-wild, all around, but when they drove their berd past Lockhart's deserted cabin he came out on the porch and glared at them. Black as hell, with bloody marks down his face and a beard that made him look like a wild-man! But Barr was the man in the saddle, and he carried it off with a smile.

"Where the hell are you going with my cattle?" snarled Grif.

"You haven't got a legally-owned cow in New Mexico," answered Bear Paw, "and the sheriff is coming up the canyon. You'd better sing low or I'm liable to swear out a warrant."

"Ahr, leave the bastard alone," jeered McDonald. "The Mexicans have a word for a cuckoo like him—they ain't none in our language. Leave him alone and come on, before I call him that name, the woman-killing son-of-a-goat."

He spat contemptuously and Lockhart stepped inside while the herd of cattle kept on. They were returning to their home-range and did not need any driving; but as they were putting them through the gate the sheriff came in sight, riding up the wash with a posse. So they turned the cattle loose and rode down to meet him—and have a drink out of his hottle.

"Evening, Charley," he greeted. "Howdy-do, Mr. McDonald. Having trouble with them rustlers?"

"Not the least in the world," answered Bear Paw cheerily. "They just

told me to help myself to any cows I laid claim to and I cut their herd to the limit."

"So?" exclaimed the sheriff. "I heard they were on the warpath and stealing you blind."

"They did that—the first time," acknowledged Barr. "And the second time—I'll admit it. But when they seen Sandy and me—and Mr. Kew, here—riding in on 'em like we meant business—are you thinking of going up there. Albert?"

The sheriff looked around and shrugged his shoulders doubtfully.

"Want to swear out a warrant?" he asked.

"Not me!" stated Bear Paw. "It's a little late, anyhow, because I've driven off all the evidence. If I'd known you were coming—"

"Oh, that's all right," replied the sherifi. "I reckon you all know how to take care of yourselves without any outside help. If it hadn't been for these desperadoes, coming up out of Mexico and drifting into Yermo by the hundred, I'd've been out here, long ago."

He paused, tugging thoughtfully at his moustache as he glanced inquiringly at Kew, but Barr did not take the hint.

"Oh, they're not so bad," he said. "Just cowboys, out of a job. Of course they will have their fun, with a few drinks under their belts; but they're good-hearted fellows—eh, Sandy?"

"The most peaceful bunch of cow-thieves I ever saw!" pronounced McDonald. "We can't get 'em to fight, nohow!"

"We had one in town last night," went on the sheriff, "that wouldn't do nothing else. He had money, too, and we tried to be reasonable; but he just laid that burg wide open."

He glanced at his posse, who nodded their heads solemnly and cocked their eyes at Kew.

"That long-haired feller?" inquired Barr.

"Yes!" barked the sheriff. "Do you know him?"

"Long, yellow hair, clear down on his shoulders, and never cracks a smile? Mr. Kew, here, whipped hell out of him a couple of months ago when he tried to run off some horses."

"No-o," decided the sheriff. "Must have been another man, then. But this rascal was yaller-headed, all right. Just up from Old Mexico, wearing these Pancho Villa leggings—"

"No, this is one of those six big jaspers that tag around with Lockhart all the time. You want to watch those men, Albert. I believe they're

train robbers or something. They're up at his ranch, the whole outfit."

"Well," observed the sheriff, looking dubiously at his watch, "I don't think I'll bother, right now. This man that I'm looking for beat up the town marshal, and these rustlers all took his part. That shows how bold they're getting, and it's something that's got to be stopped."

"You bet ye!" nodded McDonald. "Can't let that go on. I remember now, this morning, a big, strapping young (eller came loping out of town, heading straight for the Mexican Line. Must be the man you're looking for—he was riding a big red roan."

"That's him!" declared the sheriff. "Well, glad you seen him, Mr. McDonald. You old rangers notice everything, don't you? That'll save me a long, hard chase."

"Yes, he's crossed the Line, by this time," said Barr. "Better come down to my house, boys, and have some supper first, before you ride into town. It ain't often I get a chance to entertain the sheriff—have to open a bottle of my best."

"I could stand a little drink," acknowledged the sheriff, wheeling his horse and starting back; and McDonald winked at the posse.

"Sure hell being an officer, ain't it?" he remarked; and they grinned as they licked their lips.

Chapter XVIII

PVERYTHING was quiet at Bear Paw Well after the sheriff and his posse left, and Uncle Charley laughed and gave McDonald a great buffet as they opened up another bottle.

"You dammed old prevaricator!" he said. "Telling lies to a fellowofficer. But at the same time, Sandy, we had to use discretion or some
of 'em might've got killed. Old Grif himself wasn't in no Christian mood
—and that Wild Bunch won't be took, we know that. But if they'd
ridden in on young Trumbull while he was out with that girl! Ain't it
hell, the way he gets away with it?"

"I remember," began Sandy; but Bear Paw shut him up with a look. The Señora was coming out from the house.

"Carlos," she said, "with permission, I wish to speak with you."

"Yes, mi corazón," agreed Barr, rising up; and after waiting a few minutes McDonald took the hint and went to bed.

It was very quiet indeed the next morning, with no children playing about, and Johnny was wondering what had happened to Engracia when Mark came jogging down the road.

"Diós, what a head!" he grinned as he felt it over tenderly. "But no le hace—it was worth it. We emptied every bottle before we called it a day. And over at the house old Grif was carrying the cross, looking on while I kissed the bride. And was she willing? There's a live one!"

"Yeah!" agreed Kew, and waited.

"Taking a chance, too, but she didn't give a damn. Just asked me for a pistol to carry back home with her, and walked right into the house. I followed along behind, in case anything should happen; but don't you know, that rascal had skipped out! Flew the coop, by the gods, and the whole Wild Bunch with him; so we had it all to ourselves."

He paused, to feel of his head and laugh, but the Parson's face never changed.

"The sheriff was here," he said at last; and Trumbull glanced up roguishly.

"Yes?" he inquired. "Looking for me?"

"Well—maybe," admitted Kew. "But that's what scared Lockhart. He thought they were looking for him."

"The yaller-livered hound!" exclaimed Mark, contemptuously. "He wouldn't fight a flea. Those rustlers feel cheap, now I've called his bluff and they see what a coward he is. I just thought I'd see how far I could go; and, by grab, he wouldn't fight. So I took his wife away from him and told him to come and git her!"

"Wouldn't come, eh?" suggested Johnny; and Mark shrugged his shoulders and smiled.

"And those rustlers!" he went on. "They were with me to a man after we opened up that case of wine. Seems Lockhart is a tight-wad-gave 'em five dollars apiece to get drunk on, and feeds 'em on beet and beans. While he's rolling 'em high, buying champagne by the case and living on the fat of the land. If I wanted to go into that line of business I could steal every man he's got."

"Them boys ain't rustlers—just Diamond Bar cowboys. Out of a job and got to do something. They begged me to throw in with 'em and bring out a herd ourselves, but I don't like that petty-larceny stuff."

He hefted his money-belt and grinned.

"Don't need to," he said. "But listen, Johnny, I want one of those palomillo horses."

"Help yourself," replied Johnny. "Take two."

"No, just one. A gentle one, that a woman can ride. What do you think of a man that will be married a month and never give his wife a horse?"

"My God!" exclaimed Kew. "You don't mean to say you're getting this horse for her?"

"A pretty one," smirked Mark, "The prettiest one you've got. But gentle—she's never learned to ride."

"All right," agreed Johnny. "Half the bunch is yours. But be damned particular to tell 'em who's giving it—these people think those horses are mine."

"Well, they are!" came back Mark. "I told you that, already. What the hell is the matter with you, anyway?"

"I gave a colt and a mare to Engracia, here-"

"I git ye!" nodded Trumbull, winking wisely. "You're playing the same game, yourself, eh?"

"No!" flared up Kew, "I think too much of that little girl-"

"You got me wrong!" protested Mark, laying a hand on his shoulder. "I don't want any horse, at all."

"I don't want any horse, at all."
"You'll take two!" replied Johnny, "or I'll know the reason why.
Then everybody will know who gave her one."

"O.K.—make it two, then," answered Mark, imperturbably; and for himself he picked out a young stud. Then he looked them all over and selected a white mare, with black nostrils and a small, shapely head. She showed more than a trace of thoroughbred blood, but her dark eyes were as gentle as a fawn's.

"Don't you know, Parson," confided Trumbull, "I'm glad we stole them horses. But what shall we call this mare?"

"Call her Paloma—she's just like a dove. And this one you're riding is Macho. But look out for old Grif or he'll steal them both away from you—I watch that corral every night."

"Don't you never fear—I'll give the mare to Salome and them rustlers will do the rest. The first man that robs her will get strung up to a tree, and Lockhart knows it—now. He was treating her like a dog, but from now on all that is out. She's the Rustler Queen, and that pistol

I gave her—" He smiled. "It makes her feel brava to be toting a gun that was took away from a town marshal."

"Now one thing more, Johnny, and don't whisper it to a soul, I've been looking that graft over, and why let a lousy rascal like Grif get all the velvet in sight? It's nothing but a racket, the way he works it now; but before I get through I'm going to make it respectable. How'd you like to come in on the deal? Go down and bring out a herd ourselves and sell them back to the Diamond Bars. I know the Superintendent, Ben Swope, and he'd make me a good price, I know. And right there we'd get our revenge!

"I haven't forgotten how old Grif took you in, so nice and friendly and all that, when you were bringing these horses out of Mexico. And then, when you'd got them across the Line, he told you they were his. By grab, if he had known who he was talking to, he wouldn't have been quite so brash; but when you waded in and whipped him with your hands, he slapped you over the head with a six-shooter! No man can pull that on a pardner of mine. And the first crooked move he makes—blam, down comes his meat-house!"

"All right, Mark." nodded Johnny, smiling grimly. "I was figuring on that little thing, myself. Just waiting around here till I got him where I wanted him. But go ahead—give her this horse. If that don't make him fight I don't know what will. He deserves to be killed, anyhow, for marrying her the way he did—but look out or he'll shoot you from behind. You might have noticed, right there by the gate, the graves of a couple of Mexicans. He got them at daylight, when they were coming up to kill him; so be careful you don't get the same."

"From the cliff, eh?" suggested Trumbull. "I'll keep my eye open. Well, thanks for the horses—so long!"

Chapter XIX

"He's a lovable cuss, ain't he?" observed Bear Paw, who'd been watching. "Come up here—I want to talk to you."

"Yes, sir," saluted Johnny, but he looked him in the eye when they sat down under the ramada.

"Now what's all this?" inquired Barr. "And where is he going with those horses?"

"Up to the rustlers' camp at Pilares. He's going to give one to Salome."

"After you've given one to Engracia? That don't look good to me, Mr. Kew."

"No. It don't look good to me, but what can I do about it? Half of those horses are his and—"

"I thought he gave them to you!"

"He did—but you don't know Mark. He'll give away anything he's got, to a friend. And I'd do the same for him. We're regular compadres—pardners in everything—and so I have to stand for Salome. I don't like her. and I certainly don't approve of her actions, but—"

He paused as little Dolores appeared beside him and climbed up into his lap. Her eyes were big and mournful, and still wet with tears as she gazed into his face and smiled. Then she kissed him and gave him a hug before she scrambled down again.

"That is from Engracia," she said, "to tell you good-bye."

"Yes, Dolores," he answered, with a quick glance at Barr; and kissed her before he turned away. Half an hour later he started his horses up the wash, and as Bear Paw looked after him he sighed.

"A good boy," he said. "I'll miss him."

"But where is he going?" demanded the Señora, running out.

"Up to join the rustlers," replied her husband.

"But Carlos!" she scolded, "What did you say to him?"

"Nothing at all," he shrugged. "He is quick to see things, Rosita. As soon as Dolores gave him Engracia's good-bye kiss—"

"He just went away," ended Dolores.

"Ah, what a country!" sighed Rosita. "But we have to consider our daughter first. And this woman—this Salome—what a terrible creature! Without shame! A very bad influence!"

"Yes."

"But what can we do, Carlos, to bring Juanito back again?"

"Nothing. He is gone."

"And Sandy. He is gone, too."

"Yes, Sweetheart, but I am still here. Have I not held this wide valley for eighteen years? But Johnny—I shall miss him."

"Poor Juanito!" she said, gazing after him, but he never looked back as he rode. Before him the palomillos plodded reluctantly up the trail, but as they passed through the gate they threw up their heads and whinnied. It was Macho and Paloma, coming back.

"Hel-lo!" hailed Mark. "Where you going?"

"Tucson, Tubac, Tumacacori, Tombstone—to hell!" he quoted bitterly; and Salome burst out laughing.

She was attired in the most extreme Western costume, including pants, and inclined to take everything as a joke; but Trumbull dropped down off his horse

"What's the matter?" he demanded, drawing Johnny aside; "have trouble with the Old Man? How about a little raid into Mexico?"

He lowered his voice as Kew nodded, and spoke rapidly behind his hand.

"T'm starting tonight with about ten good men-meet you at Monument Sixty-six. Leave them horses in Barr's corral after dark, and don't say a word to her."

He jerked his head towards Salome, who was making another bright sally, and went back to her with a smile. Kew rode on sullenly, without giving her a look, and disappeared down a side-trail. That evening he returned the palomillos to their corral and headed down the valley towards Mexico. Monument 66 was an old rendezvous for outlaws from both sides of the Line—a column of solid concrete with the American eagle on one side and the Mexican hawk and snake on the other.

Beyond it there was nothing but desert, green with greasewood and stunted mesquite, and mysterious trails leading south. Mark looked his men over and headed for a spring, where they holed up and lay hid all day; then at sundown, fed and rested, they started down the Animas Valley towards the cattle ranges, far into Mexico. Every man of the ten rustlers had ridden those trails before and had come back with a slowmoving herd, and it was in that slowness that their danger lay. For Pancho Villa and his bandits had been whipped out of Sonora and every American they could catch they killed.

They had their reasons, and good ones; for at Agua Prieta they had been cut off from water at the Line while their enemies had been given everything. Food, water, electric power for their barbed-wire entanglements, transportation for their heavy artillery! It was a bitter and bedraggled army that returned to battle-torn Chibuahua. Trumbull knew, for he had retreated with them and had to desert to escape being killed. But now, with the fatalism of his kind, he was riding back into Old Mexico, and Johnny Kew was riding with him.

It was the old life, and he loved it for the same thrill of danger which made others want to turn back. They followed down the west side of the valley, away from the series of springs to the east where the Villistas were likely to be camped. All night they crowded their mounts to the limit, saving their spare horses for the next day, and at first dawn they swung down to a represa, or dam, which the late storm had filled to the brim.

While the cattle were coming in for their morning drink they boiled coffee and ate tortillas and jerked beef. Then, rounding up the herd, they started it north, sending a column of dust to the sky. It was the sign, the very symbol, of Americans stealing beef; but no answering dust told of pursuit. The country was empty, all the ranch-houses burned, the wind-mills overturned and destroyed. All that remained was a remnant of the vast herds which had once made this a cowman's paradise.

The Diamond Bar cowboys strung their trail-herd out and crowded the leaders to the limit; along the sides, in pairs, the flankers held the pace and more cowboys flogged along the drag. They were big steers, full-fed and filled up with water, and they moved at a very slow walk. It was their natural pace and they could not be hurried—and meanwhile there was a dust to the east. Above the tops of the yuccas and wind-tossed mesquites it showed dimly, like a distant sand-storm—only going the other way. The Mexicans had seen them and were riding to cut them off. Mark rose up in his stirrups and beckoned the horse-herders to bring up the remude.

"Well, boys," he said. "Change horses and fill your belts. Johnny and I will go ahead and stand them off while you keep those cattle moving."

He caught out his Macho horse, while Kew changed his saddle to Capitan. They were the pick of ten thousand horses, lifted by Villa from the aristocrats of Chihuahua, and to be on one made the rider a marked man; but at a time like this there was no solace so great as a good horse between their knees. If worse came to worst and they had to ride for their lives they could outrun any mount that Villa had.

They rode ahead at a gallop as the cloud of dust closed in on them, and they could see the tops of the huge, floppy sombreros that marked their enemies as Villistas.

"Durango men," observed Mark; and Johnny counted over forty.

They were riding in no order at all, save that the fastest horses were in front; but at sight of these two men, wearing Coahuila leggings, the leaders came to a halt. Trumbull spurred up on a knoll and held up his hand in the peace sign, but the Mexicans were not to be fooled. They knew they were Americans because they were driving off eattle, and they had their orders from Villa. Making peace-signs themselves they advanced at a gallop; and Johnny jerked out his high-powered rifle. He raised the sights, adjusted the wind-gauge and fired a warning shot.

"A bundred yards short," reported Mark, as he spotted the puff of dust through his field-glasses; and Johnny tried again. The third shot flung up dirt at their horses' feet and the Mexicans took the hint. In a great cloud of dust they whipped off out of range and halted two miles away.

"That'll hold 'em," said Trumbull. "Good shooting—they know we're Americans."

He beckoned the cowboys on and they sat down to watch their enemies. With those two, this kind of fighting was a business, learned in a hundred wild forays in the lead of Villa's army—with machine-guns to open up the way.

"Well—O.K.1" grinned Mark. "This has got soldiering beat a mile. I can get ten dollars apiece, gold, for those steers, and from the Diamond Bar outfit themselves. They're working this same business, over east of Chula Vista, but I heard they had seven men killed and that kinder slowed them down. You can't get cowboys—not even for a dollar an hour, which is what they pay—to go this far below the Line when the Mexicans are on the prod. But just for one trip it ain't so bad, is it? And you and me—we're in on the money! One half to us and one-half to these cowboys—that's the kind of deal I made. And if we win out on this I'll get me a machine-gun and run these poor paisanos ragged."

He laughed and slapped Johnny on the shoulder, then keyed down and eyed him gravely.

"What's the matter?" he asked. "Have a run-in with old Bear Paw? What the hell were you pulling out for?"

He had put off this question for a couple of days, but even now he did not get his answer.

"It was time to go," said Kew. "Sandy McDonald was quitting, too. I'm sure glad I met you at the gate."

"Wasn't it lucky!" beamed Mark. "I had a hunch, the minute I saw

you, and put this ahead a few days. Just grabbed the first ten men that were game to go and drifted out of camp, saying nothing. You never can tell, with an outfit like that, what dirty dog is spying on you, and I didn't want old Grift to know. He'll be bitting nails when he sees us coming back with all the steers we can drive. And I'll pay these boys so well they'll quit him, to a mam—and will that put his nose out of joint!"

He leaned back and laughed, then picked up his glasses and looked ahead to the east.

"Another bunch up there," he said. "But they'll never get close enough to shoot. We can knock down their horses a mile away, and they sure hate to be put afoot. And besides, these cattle are no good to them—the Company has got Villa barred. Stolen stock—he can't ship 'em. Can't even cross the Line. They ain't going to fight very hard."

"Nope," agreed Johnny and rose up moodily. "Come on, let's keep ahead."

"They sure quit quick," observed Trumbull as the forty Mexicans drifted on west.

"All the more reason for looking out for 'em," said Kew; but even their dust-cloud disappeared. It was early in September and the hot weather was at its height. The desert was shrouded with a tremulous haze that seemed to blot out everything. They scouted along through the low grease-wood and spiny solols, which hardly threw enough shade for a rattlesnake; and behind, lowing fretfully, the thirsty cattle followed in the vague hope of getting a drink.

On both sides, as they passed, the cowboys spotted more cattle and threw them into the herd. There was no danger, no excitement, just a slow, mogging walk, and they began to nod in the saddle. It was like a bad dream, brought on by the heat—a long fever, a blinding light that made their eye-lids droop if only to shut out the sun. Then it came—a high yell, a line of men across their way, bullets flying, the bang of guns. Johnny grabbed for the horn as Capitan made a jump, and they were going the other way!

Every bush in front of them had given up its man, his hair as black as the grease-wood's shadow, his rifle out in front—and shooting. If the Mexicans could shoot as well as they could hide Mark and Johnny would have been blasted to rags. They came out of it, hanging low by their horses' necks with the bullets still whifing past them, and neither man was even hurt. But Macho and Capitan were running like the wind and Trumbull was beginning to curse.

"Keep a-going!" he yelled. "Some son-of-a-goat might hit you by mistake. They're shooting a mile high—I've got a hole in my hat—but they missed the two of us—clean."

He straightened up, laughing, and up the trail to meet them came every man in the outfit. Mark had made no mistake in picking his cowboys and as they spurred past he whirled and went with them. Then they spied the Mexicans, running in every direction, and charged in after them, shooting. When it was over there were dead men in a half circle through the brush, and they let the rest of them go. These were Villa's own soldiers, and he would take it ill when he heard how they had been killed.

Chapter XX

THERE were scowls and black looks for Mark Trumbull and his men when they brought their herd to Bear Paw Well, for Lockhart's rustlers had come down to meet them; but he shouldered his way through them insolently as he rode up to where Barr was watching him. Bear Paw had his rifle on his hip ready to shoot, and the old jaunty look was gone. Grif Lockhart was wild with rage and he had been trying to pick a fight.

The news of the killing of Villa's soldiers had got to the well before Johnny, and the rustlers' business was ruined. The next man that went down there to get steers would pay for their mistakes in blood. But Trumbull had no time to talk with Lockhart—his cattle were coming on the rum—and he spurred through the rustlers to Barr.

"Evening, Colonel," he greeted. "Got a bunch of cattle coming, Can I water them at your well? Thanks! Much obliged!" He threw down a hundred dollars and rode back to meet the herd, and even Uncle Charley stared. Then he picked up the five golden twenties and stuffed them into his pocket, giving Lockhart a dirty look.

"Yes—you!" he said. "That's why he's stole all your rustlers. That's why your best men have quit you. He pays his way as he goes."

"He'll play hell, bringing his herd up my canyon," grumbled Grif.
"And if he takes 'em to Vermo that town marshal will git him. They's a reward up on his head!"

"That's all right," said Bear Paw. "We'll fix it up with the marshal. This hundred dollars gold looks good to me after watering you three times for nothing, and I'm going to use my influence."

"I offered to pay you, every time," came back Lockhart, "and you wouldn't take a cent."

"That's because I'm particular who I take money from," returned Barr: and Grif had to let it ride.

The cattle were rushing in through the open gate to quench their thirst at the troughs, and Mark was coming back with a gun-belt over his horn and a cheerful grin for all.

"Little present for you, Colonel," he said, handing the ornate pistol to Barr. "I got it from a Mexican that won't need it any more where he's gone, and it was too good a gun to leave behind."

"Yes, yes," bowed Bear Paw. "Very nice to be remembered in this way, and I'm sure the Mexican won't mind. So you had a little trouble, coming out?"

"They sure would've killed both of us," laughed Mark, "if it hadn't been for the horses we rode. They shot so high, not to hit our palomillos, all the bullets went over our heads."

"Yeah!" cut in Lockhart, "and the next party that goes down will have to pay for them men you killed."

Trumbull looked at him, saying nothing, and then he glanced through the crowd.

the crowd.

"Oh, here she is!" he said, laughing joyously as he spied Salome. "Got a little souvenir for you."

He drew a beautiful, pearl-handled revolver from his belt and, while he waited for the kiss which he claimed was his due, there were those who noticed that the muzzle of the six-shooter was pointed straight at her husband's helt.

"Hello, Mark!" she greeted, and gazed up at him lovingly as he swung down to take her in his arms.

"Here I stand," he quoted, "on two little chips And hold up to you my sweet red lips. If you don't kiss me before I count thirty I'll turn around and run like a turkey."

He straightened up, laughing, and Salome laughed back, though Grif's eyes had a cruel glint; and Uncle Charley laughed with them.

"I'll tell you," he suggested. "Gimme that town marshal's gun and I'll arrange to get it back to him. You don't need it now and—"

"Sure!" smiled Salome, handing it over; and she slipped the Mexican's gun into her holster. Then she dropped out of sight at a look from Mark and he turned to face her husband.

"Uhr!" he sneered. "So you're afraid to go down there after us boys have killed them Mexicans? Maybe we was paying for what you did to them, the last time you crossed the Line. But all right, all right, I'll go down myself, then. Me and Johnny, here!" And he smiled at his pardner.

"Suits me," agreed Kew. "That's our regular stuff—fighting Mexicans."

"We get fat on it," boasted Mark, "though I will say, right now, I could take on a little nourishment."

"Well, come in, boys—come in!" invited Uncle Charley, cordially. "Your cowboys can water that stock."

"Nope," declined Trumbull. "I'll go down and help 'em. I just came up to say that this was no common, blackleg cow-stealing raid but an honest-to-God expedition into Mexico to bring out these Diamond Bar steers. Any telegrams for me, Colonel? I wired the Superintendent, before I left, that I'd be here on the tenth—"

"Here you are!" announced Barr, delivering the wire with a flourish; and Mark tore it open, negligently.

"I thought so," he nodded.

"'Will accept delivery Yermo. Pay ten dollars gold or better. Ben Swope.'"

He read it aloud, so all could hear, and Lockhart burst out cursing.

"So that's your game!" he railed. "A company spy—a stool! I'll tell you right now, you lay a hand on my cattle—"

"Ump-umm!" grinned Trumbull. "You've got me wrong, Mister Wright! There's room enough for two of us in this game, and I'm playing it on the square. I give my men half and keep half myself—for expenses and to divide up with Johnny." "Very good!" nodded Bear Paw. "I approve of it, heartily. Make my ranch your headquarters—it won't cost you a cent—and I'll speak to the town marshal personally."

"Who—him?" laughed Mark. "That won't be necessary—I'll speak to the gentleman myself. Just a difference of opinion, while I was drunk. You couldn't blame a man for that."

"No-o!" mocked Lockhart. "Perhaps you haven't heard, they's a five hundred dollar reward on your head."

"Oh, that's all right," shrugged Mark. "Might happen to anybody.

Probably a thousand dollars up on you. But I can't stand around here chewing the rag all day—got to help them boys with our cattle."

He reined his magnificent stallion away and went galloping down to the gate and Lockhart looked after him, staring. Then he glanced at the Wild Bunch and they rode off up the canyon, their silence more eloquent than words.

Chapter XXI

TWE old cow-town of Yermo came to life with a jerk when the Diamond Bar herd hove in sight; and at the mmm-wah and ba-aw of cattle a lone horseman outrode all the rest. It was Ben Swope, the Diamond Bar Superintendent, and he greeted Mark Trumbull with a grin.

"Morning, Mark," he hailed. "Reckon I oughter tell you, they've got your picture up all over town. Not a very good likeness, either; and over the top it says FIVE HUNDRED DOLLARS REWARD."

"Oh—that!" laughed Mark. "Say, you've been around some. Ever hear of a man being arrested for bringing cattle into a cow-town? That's all they live on is us cowboys. Do you recognize the brand on them steers?"

"Shore do!" chuckled Swope. "Looks good to me, too. Heard you had a fight, gitting 'em out, and killed a lot of Mexicans."

"Yes. Quite a few. They laid an ambush for us. How much you going to give me for that bunch?"

"I'll pay you well!" declared Swope, "Jest to encourage the rest of

'em and break up this damned rustling. How about ten dollars, round?"
"O.K.," nodded Mark, "if that's your best price. The boys were

"O.K.," nodded Mark, "if that's your best price. The boys were

"Fifteen it is, then," agreed Swope. "Nothing small about me but my feet. You've treated me fair and I'll treat you the same. Were you thinking of going back I'll make it work you while."

thinking of going back? I'll make it worth your while."
"That'll depend," said Mark, "on several things, including this picture on the wall. If they're going to arrest me the first time I bring in a

"All a mistake!" exclaimed Swope. "The town marshal is sorry. But leave it to me—I'll fix that."

"Fair enough. I'll meet him half-way. Here's his pistol I'm bringing back, and I'm willing to apologize. But no rough stuff—I'm not used to that."

"By the gods, boy—no! Traveling with Villa, the way you did. I'll explain to the marshal, but we'll load our cattle first. Kinder give him a chance to cool off. See them cars, down on that siding? Got an engine, all waiting. Hello, Charley." And he waved his hand. "See you've got a bunch of my old Diamond Bar cowboys. Hello, Bragg! Well, by grab, here's John Crump!"

He went down the line, shaking hands with all he met, and Trumbull winked at Johnny.

"Arrest—hell!" he scoffed. "I'm going to lay this town wide open. Don't make me laugh about that small-town bull. But you stay sober and look after the money. What do you think about going back into Mexico?"

"All right," shrugged Kew. "No le hace a mi!"

"Nothing to you, eh?" went on Mark. "What's the matter with you, Johnny? Heard they sent your little play-mate off to school."

"Yes. Sent her off, Too damned rough around the ranch, But don't let that prey on your mind. Go ahead and have your drunk."

"No, but listen, Johnny—this ain't right. I want you to have a good time, too. Now if you had your wish, what would you ask for? You don't drink or gamble or hell around with women. Isn't there anything in the world you want?"

"Nothing that I can get," answered Johnny. "And yet, seeing old Bear Paw so contented and happy—"

"Ain't it a fact?" nodded Mark. "His wife just loves him, and he calls

her 'My Sweetheart'; and every time those kids come around—say, is that what you had on your mind?"

"Well—yes," admitted Kew "It shows it's still possible for a man to be happy—have a home and settle down. I like to be around there, where I can watch the children play and have 'em climb up on my knees; but the first thing I knew they sent Engracia away, and Dolores will be going next. It's too rough out here for a man to raise a family. Always some drunken gang of rustlers, coming through and trying to pick a fight with Bear Paw—and if they ever down him they'll grab the range and the Sefora will be left with nothing."

"And that reminds me," said Mark, "we were going to tend to Lockhart before he kills the Old Man. But the son-of-a-goat won't fight! They's nothing you can do to him to make him draw and shoot. He's got no shame, whatever."

"All he thinks about," grumbled Kew, "is money—and getting what he wants. The best of everything."

"Yes—heh, heh! He was good and sore when he saw us come in with this herd, and heard about us killing them Mexicans. The next man that goes in there is going to have a running fight from the time he crosses the Line. We might get him wiped out that way. Make it so hot that the Villistas will kill him and save you and me the trouble. But hell, you can't count on that. When we get back to camp I'll give him a razeledazzle that will jump him clean out of his britches. Steal that wife of his, by grab, and laugh him out of the country. A man has got to have some shame!

"Not him!" declared Johnny. "He's as cold-blooded as a rattlesnake —with a breath on him like a Gila monster."

"All right," laughed Mark. "We'll make him hiss like one. Have to tame this town marshal first, though. Get our hand in on him and work it out on Grif—I hate the dirty dog."

He snapped his fingers impatiently and rode off down the line, sitting straight on his fine palomillo, the very picture of a warrior—and the town marshal kept in his hole. Everybody else came out, though—the courtezans in carriages, the town-boys on livery stable plugs, the gamblers, the saloon-keepers, the pimps. And at the shipping-yards they found six cowboys, waiting to help them load the cattle.

They counted out eleven hundred and forty-two head in all and Swope paid for them in cash.

"Well, boys," said Mark, as his men lined up expectantly and the towns-people stood gaping at the pile, "we'll divide this half-and-half. One half to me, for doing the heavy thinking, and taking a chance on getting killed. O.K.? Somebody help me count."

He rose up laughing, stuffing the small bills into his shirt and giving the big ones to Kew.

"Come on, boys," he yelped, grabbing the marshal's pistol and tying it on the end of a stick, "got to take this gun back and give it to the bull before he goes on the prod. Bunch up behind me while we charge into town and make the presentation in style."

He gave the Villa yell as he galloped down the street, and all the rustlers joined in. But at the first saloon he jumped off his horse and flung a twenty on the bar. And at the next saloon—and the next!

The money was flowing like water, all the cowboys in town had joined in; and when they lined up before the glowering marshal there was nothing for him to do but submit.

"Mr. Marshal," began Mark, holding out the pistol, "here's a gun I took away from you by mistake. I apologize. Have a drink. All we ask is a chance to spend our money before you run us in."

"Go to it!" yapped the marshal, smiling thinly; and went off talking to himself.

Chapter XXII

I ** was the morning after, or the morning after that—Mark was a trifle sketchy about the time—but he woke up in Johnny Kew's adobe with the sun high up in the sky. And Johnny in the doorway, smiling, with Dolores on his knee.

"Is he awake?" she whispered, looking in; and Johnny put her down.

"Yes, Little One," he answered, giving her a start towards the house; and Trumbull blinked his eyes. Then he rose up lazily, washed his face and shaved and put on a brand new suit.

"Pretty flossy," he observed, looking it over. "Makes you want to ride around and see your girl—if you get what I mean. How about a social call on the rustler's wife—this Salome girl that loves me so?" "O.K." nodded Kew, "only we want to watch that trail or we'll never get back alive."

"Oh sure, sure—but now for something to eat and a little snort from

He picked up a quart bottle that lay on the floor and took a long, heartening swig.

"Don't you know," he said, "I feel fresh as a daisy. Like I want to do something big. But at the same time, Parson, we could easily overdo this—making a call on Grif Lockhart's wife. If he wasn't such a low-spirited hound—what do you think, will he put up a fight?"

"He never has yet," said Kew.

"No, but suppose he would? What then?"

Johnny looked at him coldly and shrugged.

"You're going, ain't you?" he inquired.

"Sure as hell," assented Mark. "That's the way I live my life. Pick out something big I know I can't do, then go ahead and do it. How do you feel about this Salome gal? Ain't she the prettiest little piece you ever laid eyes on? And to think of her, living with that low-browed rascal, a cross between a sheep-herder and a chimpanzee, and never turning a hair. You've got to hand it to her—that takes nerve. And when you think of what he did to that first wife of his—"

He rolled his eyes and blinked.

"It takes nerve," admitted Kew.

"I wonder—" began Trumbull, and stopped. Then he hung on his gun-belt, felt the money-belt inside it, grabbed his rifle and stepped out the door. An hour later they rode through Pilares Canyon and came out at the rustlers' camp.

It was just down the creek from Lockhart's house and the rustlers were gathered about their fire, drinking coffee off the grounds. But when they saw Mark—and Johnny, close behind him—they roused up and opened a bottle.

"Well," grinned Mark, "the morning after, eh? Try a little shot of mine."

He passed his bottle around and sat down sociably, while Kew kept an eye on the house, where the door had opened a crack.

"Where's Grif?" inquired Mark at last; and the rustlers glanced at each other.

"Up the canyor," answered a fighting fool named Dempsey who had

gone with them on their last trip. "Seems he don't like neighbors, so he's moving out these jaspers that have located along the creek. Looks to me like he was planning to stay."

"I get you," nodded Trumbull. "Just sticking around a while—keeping an eye on his happy home."

"Well, something like that," admitted Dempsey, and the door began to joggle and jerk. Then it came wide open and Salome stepped out, her pearl-handled pistol to the front.

"Morning, boys!" she called; and Mark rose up, bowing.

"Morning, Queen!" he answered. "How you like my new suit? The very latest—from Harlem, New York. I rode clear up here to show you."

"Have to come over and look at it," she said, and the rustlers lifted their eyes to the crags. But she came on, regardless; and as she drew near they regarded her admiringly. She was wearing a house-dress of Chinese silk, and all the glory of youth was in her stride. Even Johnny caught his breath as the wind blew against her, revealing a form like the Winged Victory—and her lips parted in a smile.

"Oh—Harlem, eh?" she laughed, reaching out to feel the fabric. "That's where all the colored folks come from."

"Yes, yes," agreed Mark. "I won it at a raffie—best suit in the New York Store."

"Fine!" she said. "How do you like my new dress?"

She spread out the red skirt—just as she had, long before, for Johnny—and raised it, a little too high.

"Oh, you're looking at my legs!" she cried, and Trumbull winked at her boldly.

"By grab—yes!" he grinned. "I'd seen lots of legs before I saw yours, but they're sure hard to beat. Come over and sit down, right close to me. Have you missed me while I was gone?"

He patted a grassy spot and she sank down laughing, while the rustlers began to move away. This was getting too romantic entirely—with Old Grif and his Wild Bunch in the rocks and the bullets liable to fly any time. They had a native reticence which bade them retire and give the young lovers the stage. But Trumbull pursued his wooing fearlessly, leaving Johnny to watch the rocks. It was an understanding they had between them, and Salome chose to ignore him.

"How about a little giggle-water?" inquired Mark at last; but Salome shook her head.

"Twe got some more coming, but they drank it all up. Let's open some canned goods and give the boys a treat. Mr. Lockhart won't mind, I'm sure."

"No-o!" agreed Trumbull and followed after her, laughing, as she started a race for the house.

They came out, still laughing and carrying a box between them. Mark spread out a canvas, grabbed up the camp hatchet and began opening cans with two chops—one straight across and the other across that. Peaches, pears, potted meats and caviar; and, as they sat down to eat, a wagon drove in, loaded down with barrels and boxes.

"Eee-hoo!" cheered Trumbull, leaping up at sight of it. "Just on time, to the minute, old man. Get down and join us while we drink to the Queen. Ever hear of the Queen of the Rustlers?"

He waved a hand towards Salome, unbuckled his money-belt and shook out a handful of twenties. $\,$

"Keep the change!" he said. "Never mind Mr. Lockhart—you can bring him up another load."

"Well—all right," shrugged the driver; and Mark knocked off the neck of a bottle to give him the first drink of all. Then they filled up their glasses and empty tomato-cans and drank a toast—to the Queen!

Salome laughed—they all laughed—and in the midst of their party Grif Lockhart and his Wild Bunch rode in. But Mark met them with a smile and a roguish twinkle of the eye—while all the rustlers stood dumb.

"Good evening, Mr. Lockhart," he said. "Too bad you're so late—all the giggle-water is drunk up."

He laughed raucously and Kew moved off to one side where he could get a raking shot at the Bunch, but Lockhart only stared. He seemed paralyzed by the effrontery of it all—though he had been through the same thing once before—but Mark had just got started.

"I thought," he suggested, "your wife might want to take a ride. On that Paloma horse I gave her. How about it, Queen?"

He smiled ingenuously, but at the look in his eyes the hot blood mounted her cheeks.

"I'd love to!" she responded, and glanced up at her husband defiantly.

"Oh, he won't mind," mocked Trumbull, trying to goad Grif out of

his trance. "Run in and put on your riding suit while I catch up your horse."

He paused, expectantly; glanced inquiringly at Kew; looked around at the startled rustlers; but Lockhart did not move. He had that baffling way, when they were trying to make him fight, of saying and doing nothing.

"Ho, hum," sighed Mark, sauntering off towards the corral; and when Salome dashed out he was waiting with her horse.

"Up you go," he said, lifting her into the saddle. Then he stepped up slowly on Macho, looked at Johnny and rode away.

Kew stayed behind, waiting, his eyes on Grif—showing his teeth in a saturnine smile as he watched the frozen-faced Wild Bunch. He could not believe that in the presence of all those men, Lockhart could be so pusillanimous. Until the very last, when Mark's broad back disappeared around the point, he stood waiting for the break—that sudden leaping to arms that would result in the roaring of guns and a battle to the death. As long as he expected that he kept his feet on the ground. Now he stepped up and rode off after his friend, who had dared to steal another man's wife. For the second time, before them all—and Grif had let it pass! He had become that kind of a husband for which the Americans have no name, and the Mexicans a very bad one.

Johnny sighed as he loped away down the canyon until he caught up with Mark and Salome. They were riding knee to knee, leaning over to steal kisses. Then Trumbull picked her up and held her in his arms, guiding his horse out of the trail with his knees. Johnny rode past and sighed again.

Chapter XXIII

The next morning, late, Mark and Salome came riding down the Wash and Kew sent Dolores to the house. Then he waited—with that fixed, patient smile which he reserved for the peccadillos of his friend—and Trumbull sprung the big news.

"They're gone," he announced, "Old Grif and his Wild Bunch. Rounded up his cattle and started up the Rustlers' Trail—looks like we smoked him out."

Johnny glanced up at Salome, who divined his thought.

"I'm going to stay with Mark," she announced; and Johnny looked at his pardner inquiringly.

"Not much you ain't," came back Trumbull. "You nor anybody else.

Johnny Kew is my compadre, and has been for years. You're just another woman that I stole."

He grinned and slapped her on the leg as he dropped down off his horse.

"I'm dead for sleep, Johnny," he said. "Mind if I lie down on your bed?"

"There it is," answered Kew, and faced her defiantly; but Salome was watching Mark.

"I'm taking a chance, Johnny," she said at last, as her lover fell asleep.
"But I'd rather die with Mark than live with Grif. I never knew what love was until he came into my life."

She got off, unasked, and sat down beside him, and Johnny could smell the strong perfume she used and see the tired lines around her eyes. She was pretty, in a way, but there was something about hersomething fleshy, repellent, common. Her body was beautiful, but she had sold it for money and her eyes were shallow and hard. And her mouth—it was a raw, coral slash, red as blood and drawn to a line.

"Johnny," she began again, "you don't like me, do you? You hate me for what I have done. Yet you went up there with us and stayed behind to stand guard while Mark and I rode away. That shows you're not so bad—can I go in there and rest?"

"No!" he answered, "you stay out of that house. Mrs. Barr has something to say about this and she doesn't approve, at all."

"All right," she said. "I'm too happy to sleep, anyway. I know it can't last—he's not the marrying kind—and we have to take things as they are. But tell me, Johnny—you won't mind if I ask—do you think that Mark will be true to me?"

"Well," he shrugged, "maybe. He's never been true to any other woman—but as long as he can take you away from your husband—"

"Oh, is that it?" she cried; and he nodded.

"It's the danger that appeals to him," he said.

"Well, that is something," she sighed. "He's the bravest man I ever saw, and I try to be brave for his sake. I know that any minute my husband may kill me, as he killed that other one before me; but when Mark comes in and asks me to go with him—I just don't care. I go. Oh, it's wonderful to think that when my life was blackest Mark came and took me away from him. He just picked me up and carried me off—and when I opened my eyes, he smiled! All I dream of now is a little home, with him, and I'll work my fingers to the bone."

She sat on the steps and ran on, endlessly, and Johnny listened patiently. She was like all the women of her type—absolutely sure that each affair was the last, the greatest love in the world. Yet as she talked and he listened her hand crept into his, she held it close as she tried to win him over; then she leaned against him, gently, and looked up into his eyes; and he knew—she was going to kiss him.

"No," he said sternly. "You're Mark's girl, not mine." And he drew his hand away.

"Yes," he said, and glanced back at Mark, who had opened his eyes and was listening. "Well, get up," he went on, "and take her off my hands, before I forget we're compadres."

"Oh, you're all right," chuckled Trumbull. "I'd trust you anywhere—especially after what I've just seen. And heard, by grab! I haven't been asleep—just getting an earful of news."

"Well, you must have heard a plenty," observed Salome, recklessly. "Come on, let's take a ride—as far as we can go."

"All right," prompted Mark. "And then-"

"I won't tell you," she pouted; and he laughed.

"Have to go along then, and find out," he said. He slapped Johnny on the back, caught her up in his strong arms and set her on her horse. It was two days before he came back, and then he rode in alone.

"By the gods," he cursed, "I'm in wrong a mile. What do you think of a married woman that will play a trick like that? But she got that 'little home' idea into her head and now she's put something over on me. Or at least, that's what she says. But she can't make me marry her, because she's married already. Aha! I had that all figured out! It just goes to show you can't trust a woman. If they ever fall in love with you they'll do anything to make you marry them, so I guess I'll be on my way. How would you like to drift down to the Diamond Bar outfit and frame up another raid? It's safer stealing cows and fighting off Pancho Villa than playing around with her. O.K. then, pardner, let's go."

Chapter XXIV

THEY went—right now, without saying good-by—and all the way to the Line, Mark Trumbull was cursing Salome. A man was a fool that would fall for a girl like that; but he would show her whether he would come back. Never stole a woman yet that she didn't try to double-cross him—make him marry her, or something like that. Always trying to talk him over and get him to quit his pardner, settle down and take care of her.

He laughed and slapped Johnny on the back as they gazed off into Old Mexico,

"Not for me," he declared. "I like fighting too well—and you. You're a good man, Parson—a man I can tie to—and these floosies only give you a pain. You're wise to 'em, the first time you ever lay eyes on 'em; but me, I've got to find out. And then what good does it do me? I'll fall for the next one, just the same."

"That's right," agreed Johnny. "It's the way you're built, I reckon. I'd like to have a home, and a wife to take care of. But hell, what's the use—I can't have one. Got no business even thinking of getting married, the way we're rambling about. Some day I'll stop a slug—aimed at somehody else—and the Mexicans will have their revenge.

"They can't hit me!" exulted Trumbull. "I've seen 'em try it too often. I never turn a hair, just let 'em keep on shooting while I hold a dead center, and pull. But what we need now is a good water cooled machine-gun and I'll show 'em we're soldiers from hell. Ben Swope is our man, if we can get him feeling right; but he's so damned low-spirited on account of his losses I don't believe he'll cross the Line, at all."

"He'll go," predicted Kew, "if he can get some new blood. That was a good bunch of warriors we took in last time, and I know we could get them again; but, now we've broken away from them, let's keep clear of those rustlers—Old Grif and all the rest."

"Yes—and her!" added Mark. "I mean it. She's got a way about her—by the gods, she made my heart turn over—but I can see now she's a schemer. She's dangerous, that girl—I'll do anything when she's around.

Anything to make her laugh. Didn't I give old Grif the razzle-dazzle

right? Just to show off to Salome. It's a God's wonder some rustler didn't bore me between the shoulders—riding in and out of that canyon. And two Mexicans killed there already! That shows they know their stuff."

"That's something I could never understand," said Kew. "They're the hardest-looking gang I ever ran into, and yet they never do anything. I whipped four of them one time with my bare hands and robbed them of all their horses—beat 'em up with a six-shooter worse than they ever beat me—but they'll never draw a gun. I believe they've got orders from Lockhart. But when he turns 'em loose—look out!"

"I'm looking!" laughed Mark. "Never again for me. She can go plumb to hell, as far as I'm concerned. We're lucky to be alive."

"Luckier than we know," answered Johnny; and they shook hands as they turned off to the east.

For fifty miles along the Line there was no fence, no border patrol; just an open place on both sides of Chula Vista which nobody was bound to respect. The Diamond Bar outfit was camped east of town, at a burned-out ranch with the wind-mill knocked down but with a six-strand barbed-wire fence for their horses. The chuck-wagon was parked by the corrals when Kew and Trumbull rode in, but not a soul was in sight.

"Off on a raid, I'll bet ye!" exclaimed Mark, But, worse than that, they were back from a raid. Worn out and haggard from days and nights in the saddle, gaunted down to skin and bones and dead for sleep, they lay like living skeletons in their canvas-covered beds, oblivious to everything in the world.

A cold north wind had sifted sand on top of them until they were almost buried from sight, and after a hasty look around the pardners retired and left them to sleep it off. Then the cook returned from a drunk in Chula Vista and the camp slowly came to life. At the smell of boiling coffee one cowboy after the other dug out and moved over to the fire. They drank slowly, surveying their visitors with lack-luster eyes, until at last Ben Swope appeared.

His sunken cheeks, with the skin stretched over his skull, made him look like an animated corpse; but the Superintendent was still alive.

"Dod-ram it," he rumbled as he poured out his first cup. "What the hell are you doing here, now? Why didn't you come before, like you promised, when you could do us a little good? Now three of my best men are dead and the rest are burned out on the job."

His cheeks pulsed feebly as he drank down the hot coffee and filled his cup again.

"I pay my regular punchers two hundred and fifty dollars a month, and still the bastards quit me. A dollar an hour for every hour below the Line, and every man has called for his time. What's the use of going down there when we lose all we ketch and they's a Mexican behind every bush?"

He sighed and looked them over bleakly while he drained the second cup.

"Have to get the rascals drunk or they wouldn't go in at all—and then they ain't worth a damn."

He mumbled a cold biscuit with his few remaining teeth and heaved another sigh.

"I'm an old man before my time," he complained; and fell into a ruminative silence.

Mark and Johnny slipped away and left him, and the next morning he was able to smile

"Well, glad to see you, boys," he said. "I sure need some men of your kind. It takes soldiers to fight soldiers, and that's what we're up against —Pancho Villa has sent out a regiment. And them that ain't soldiers are the worst of all—these Durango bandits that can hide behind a straw. They re he ones that lay all these ambushes."

"Yes-and shoot our horses," put in a dragged-out cowboy, "I had to walk clean to the Line. With boots on," he added; and shuddered.

"So it goes," observed Swope. "Well, what you got on your mind?"
He turned to Trumbull, who only shrugged and smiled.

"Still buying cattle?" he asked.

"Yes, I'm buying cattler" he asked.
"Yes, I'm buying 'em—at fifteen dollars a head. But by the time

you've ridden sixty miles into Mexico and rounded up a bunch, you'll realize it's a lo-ong ways back. They've taken to driving the cattle south, just to put us in the hole."

"Never again for me," stated the sore-footed cowboy; and the rest agreed to a man.

"Ever think about using a machine-gun?" ventured Mark, when the faint-hearts had drifted away; and for the first time Swope came alive. "No!" he vapped. "Can you get one?"

"For a thousand dollars," replied Trumbull. "I've got a good one hid, over west of here. It's worth that much to get it."

"Will you stay and run it?" demanded Swope.

"For one half of all we bring out, at fifteen dollars a head. But we've got to have some new men that will fight. Pay these boys off and let them go—I know another bunch we can use."

"Those fellers I met at Yermo? John Crump—Charley Scrimpser—Bragg?"

" $\widetilde{\mathrm{Yes}},$ and a whole lot more that are on the bum around there. They know me and Johnny can shoot."

"Good enough!" pronounced the Boss, after thinking it over. "But listen, boys—keep this dark. Get your gun first—then get your men. We'll take these Villistas by surprise."

"I may pull this off by myself," suggested Mark. "All right by you? O.K."

Chapter XXV

"T'S ALWAYS different from what you thought," observed Trumbull,
as he retired for a conference with Kew. "Now we've got to go
back and round up all those rustlers—got to have some men with
nerve."

"Well, I'll go and do that while you get the machine-gun. I'll slip them out of the canyon while Grif is away with his cattle. But listen, let's work it like this. Meet at Monument Sixty-six in four days, with the machine-gun and all set to go. Then have Ben Swope shoot 'em up back here while we ride down the west side. That will keep Villa's soldiers off our necks until we can drive out the herd."

"I can beat that!" came back Mark. "We'll fool old Ben, too. The cook done told me they's some spies around Chula Vista that tip Villa off, every time. We'll fool 'em all, by grab, and get half-way home before they know we're gone."

"This is getting so easy," grinned Johnny, "it's a shame to take the money. But O.K.—I'll meet you in four days."

"We'll stage a fight with Ben before we start and tell him to go to hell. How's that for a stall?" laughed Mark. "And don't tip your hand until the very day you leave. Just grab your men and go." "Easy!" repeated Kew; but when he rode in to Bear Paw Well he knew that something was wrong. Barr was out on the point with his rifle across his arm, and he came down the hill to meet him.

"Johnny," he said, "I've been watching for you for days, just hoping you'd come back. And now I need you worse than ever. Grif Lockhart and his Wild Bunch just went by up the canyon; and oh, what a look they gave me! I haven't dealt with that class of hombres for nothing and I know they're going to make trouble. But where's Mark? Hope there's nothing wrong!"

"No, he's all right. Down digging up a machine-gun we're liable to need in our business. Villa is on the warpath like a wolf. Ben Swope and his outfit got ambushed again and lost three good men and their herd!"

"Well, come in—come in and have a drink. Rosita is sure expecting you. This will look like an answer to her prayers—she's been kneeling before the Virgin all day. And Dolores has been praying for you, too."

He picked her up as she came running down the hill and handed her over to be kissed; and at the gate the Señora stood waiting with sudden tears in her eves.

"Ah, Juanito!" she sighed, clasping both his hands. "You have come, gracias a Diós y la Virgen María. I was afraid that something was wrong. Did we offend you in any way that you went off so suddenly, without even saving good-by?"

"No, no," he protested. "It was just that my compadre felt a sudden desire to go—and I was glad it was so. I wished to get him away from this one up the canyon, but now we will not speak of that."

He glanced at Dolores, who flung herself into his arms again, and they let the rest of it wait. It was enough that he had come when they needed him, but after support Barr beckoned him outside.

needed nim, but after supper Barr deckoned nim outside.

"She's been down every day," he confided, "and it seems they had a spat. All she can talk about is, when will Mark be back. She never thought he'd out her like that."

"Yes," nodded Johnny, "they had a fight; and Mark has quit her cold. I was glad to get him out of the country before her husband killed him."

"Grif has had an awful grouch—ever since you boys brought out that big herd from Mexico. Didn't like the idea of your coming through this way—it called attention to him. He was ready to kill me before you got in that time—seemed to hold me responsible in some way—but when Mark stepped in and made love to Salome! That saved my bacon, I know. He's a great boy, and I only wish he'd stay. And you too, Johnny —we need you. To tell you the truth I haven't felt noways safe since you left."

"It's a risky business," said Johnny at last, "just having Grif Lockhart around. I can't make out whether he's crazy or not, but if he isn't he soon will be. That wife of his is trying to start a killing, and any man will do. Just so he kills her husband and leaves her free to marry Mark."

"Well, now here, Johnny. I'm glad you brought that up—be careful you ain't the man. I know the way you feel about Mark—and it's perfectly all right with me—but don't let her make you the goat. That's going pretty far when they ask you to stay behind while he rides off with Grif's wife—"

"They didn't ask me—I did it, myself."

"Well-do you approve of this woman-stealing?"

"No, not at all. But if Mark wants to do it-"

"He's your pardner, eh? Well I've seen lots of Mexicans that were compadres in everything, but you have got them beat a mile. It's all to your credit, but we like you, and we don't want to see you killed."

"I'll have something to say about that," answered Kew; and Barr let the matter drop.

"Going to bring out some more cattle?" he inquired.

"Well, maybe—but not through here. I'm more afraid of her than of her husband. We'll probably ship from Deming."

"Something strange going on up that canyon—it's got all these rustlers guessing. She stays right on with Grif, as if everything was O.K.—and buying more stuff all the time. She seems to do it to spite him. Have you heard the latest? She's ordered a Hollywood bungalow, complete, shipped out here knocked-down from Los Angeles. I can't make her out, nor nobody else, but she's sure crazy over Mark."

"Yes," grumbled Kew. "That's what drove him away. As long as these women resist him, or he stands a chance of getting killed by their husbands, he'll stick around a while; but he has no ambitions to be a family-mam—and things were getting too slow."

"They won't be slow, where he's going," predicted Barr; and Johnny shrugged his shoulders.

"That's the way he likes it," he said.

"But how about you? Do you like it that way, too?"

"Well, so, so—I like the excitement. But sooner or later we're going to

He sighed and looked down to find Dolores struggling up into his lap, where she gave him another kiss. Then she gazed up at him adoringly, and Johnny glanced at Barr.

"Have you come back to stay?" she demanded, "or are you going away again? I wish you wouldn't!" she said, and cuddled down in his lap.

"Johnny finds it too slow here, since Engracia left," said Bear Paw, and they both waited for him to speak; but Johnny said never a word. Not since his little sweetheart had been sent away had he even mentioned her name.

"By the way," went on Barr, "I've still got those horses. But what am I going to do with them if you don't come back some time? That's a dangerous business, bucking Villa."

"Well," smiled Johnny, as if it were nothing, "we'll give half of them to Engracia and half to Dolores. How's that, Little One? 'Sta bueno?' And, just so you won't get tired of waiting. I'll give you a colt, in the morning."

"And it's mama?" she gasped, "to take care of it?"

"Yes, the mama, too."

Dolores leapt to the ground and started to run to her mother, but at a sudden thought she stopped.

"I'd rather you wouldn't get killed," she said; and both of them burst out laughing.

Chapter XXVI

T OHNNY was down in the corral the next morning, picking out a horse for Dolores, when there was a clatter of hoofs up the road and

Salome came down at a gallop.
"Why Johnny!" she cried. "Where's Mark? Is he dead?"

"No," he laughed. "Just detained on important business. I hear Mr. Lockhart is back."

He mentioned it just to remind her, and she stuck out her tongue at him spitefully.

"Yes," she said, "if that's any of your business, he is. But isn't Mark

"Not unless he changes his mind," he stated. "But just a moment, please."

He picked up Dolores, whispered in her ear and started her off to the house.

"Heh!" sneered Salome. "A regular family man, ain't you? Have to send her away before she hears something naughty. Am I as bad as all that?"

"You don't care what you say," he rejoined, "and that's what counts with the Señora. I'm a guest at this ranch and don't want to lose my welcome so..."

"I don't care!" she burst out. "I'm in love with Mark and I don't care who knows it—other people can think what they please. I know you don't like me; but what do I care, as long as I have Mark?"

"You haven't got Mark!" he retorted. "He's gone, and he won't be back."

"Yes!" she cried accusingly. 'And you're the man that got him to go! What is it to you, anyway?"

Then, as he did not reply, she burst into tears.

"I never thought," she sobbed, "he'd leave me like that. Oh, Johnny, doesn't he love me any more? Did I drive him away by speaking the way I did? Please tell him I'm awful sorry!"

"All right," he said at last.

"And tell him to please come back," she went on. "I'll never scold him any more. I know I can't have him—he's not the marrying kind but I'm going to stay right here, no matter how unhappy I am, so he can find me when he comes. Oh, don't you understand? I love him!"

"Sure, I understand," grumbled Kew; and something he left unsaid suddenly stung her to an unreasoning hate.

"You think you're so superior!" she spat. "I remember, before Mark came, you wouldn't hardly speak to me, when I was just dying for somebody to talk to. Just because I made a mistake and married Mr. Lockhart!"

"Well, call it a mistake, if you want to!" he came back. "You married him for his money—I know the whole story—and it turned out

to be a mistake. Yes—you married a rustler. A murdering dam' cowthief, on the dodge on both sides of the Line."

"You shut up!" she screamed, slapping her hands against the bars, "you can't speak about my husband like that! I guess he's got his points, as well as the rest of us, and—" The clack of a horse's hoofs up the road attracted Johnny's attention and without stopping to look around he reached up for his rifle. He had hung it by the scabbard on the inside of the fence and Salome had not even seen it, but when he snatched it down and jacked up a cartridge it was to face Grif Lockhart, riding in on him. Grif and all his men, twenty-eight or thirty of them, all weighed down with weapons.

"Aha!" Lockhart sneered. "Talking to my wife again." And Kew raised a yell for Barr. This was what they had been looking for and Gril's hog-eyes were gleaming, but before he could begin to shoot the house-gate slammed and Bear Paw came striding out.

"You go on!" he bellowed at Lockhart, holding his rifle at a ready.
"On your way, you damned murderer, before I bust you wide open
with this!"

Lockhart started and looked back questioningly at the gunmen behind him, but Bear Paw had him covered and Grif held up his hand, still riding

"Yes, sir." he answered mockingly and passed on through the gate the headed off south, into Mexico. Kew and Barr stood staring, Salome tried to explain, but as Johnny turned on her accusingly she galloped away up the road. It looked to Barr as if Grif and his men had come down to shoot it out with them, then changed their minds and passed on.

"I'm going," said Kew. "Got to turn Mark back before these rustlers kill him."

He threw his saddle on Capitan and rode along behind them, and at Monument Sixty-six, when he looked down Animas Valley, he sighted Trumbull coming back. There was a cloud of dust down in Mexico, where Lockhart and his men had gone in regardless and were bringing out a herd.

"What the hell?" demanded Mark, pointing towards them, and Kew beckoned him towards the Line.

"On our way," he said, "before the Mexicans see that dust and ride in on us by the thousand. Grif is back and on the prod and you want to keep away from him. But what's this, now, over east?" Through his glasses Kew could see them, a long line of infantry, and at the first volley from their long-range German Mausers the dust rose about the herd like a cloud. Racing plumes appeared in the western passes where the cavalry rushed in to cut them off and Johnny put spurs to his horse. Then, from the slow-moving herd, a band of horsemen separated from the rest, and Trumbull began to curse.

"That's Grif," he yapped. "Making his git-away, as expected, leaving his men to stand off Villa if they can. Never mind that Line—just keep on going and I'll meet you at Chula Vista. No. by grab, they've got our horses spotted—the only palomillos in the country!"

He leaned forward in the saddle and Macho outran them as if they had been staked, but back at the herd a battle was going on and it was every man for himself. Squadron after squadron of Villa cavalry charged in on them and cut them off from the Line. Then, far ahead, Johnny spied a black horse and knew it for Grif Lockhart, running away.

"They're whipped," he declared. "Going back to Pilares, to clean up on Uncle Charley. Are you game to take a hand?"

"Not me," grumbled Mark, reining in and turning east. "Hell, you don't need any help. I'm going down to El Paso to get me a new machine-gun—meet me at Chula Vista in three days."

Chapter XXVII

NCLE CHARLEX was more pleased than he would admit when he saw Kew riding back from the Line, for he could see in the distance Grif Lockhart and his warriors and he knew they were coming back whipped. Like Ben Swope and his men after their last trip into Mexico, they had had enough to last them a lifetime, but Grif would be on the prod. Two days and nights without a wink of sleep would not improve his disposition and Johnny got out his guns, but before the rustlers arrived Salome came galloping up from where she had been watching the trail.

"Oh, where is Mark?" she wailed, "is he killed?"

"Not yet," Kew answered consolingly. "It was Grif and his rustlers that caught hell."

She looked out across the flat to where her husband was dragging in, dead beat, and beckoned Kew enticingly with one finger.

"Isn't Mark coming back?" she whispered. "Please tell me."

"No," he shrugged. "He's heading for El Paso."

"And you're glad!" she snapped back at him savagely. Then she whipped up her horse and clattered off across the flat, and they could see her kissing her husband.

"Uhh!!" grunted Bear Paw. "Ever hear of this Lucretia Borgia? She always embraced her man and gave him a kiss before she put the pizen in his soup. But this girl could give her cards and spades. Remember how she cried when Grif came back the first time, and she was fainting away in our arms? But if he keeps on going out he ain't going to come back sometime, and that's the only out I've got. Otherwise they'll camp down at Pilares and steal me blind."

"Very likely," agreed Kew. "But give me a chance and see if I can't get him to fight."

He stepped up on his horse and sat watching them as they rode in for a drink, but Lockhart never looked up. He had made a grandstand play when he had his gang behind him, but now they lay dead, down in Mexico. All except the Wild Bunch, who had deserted in a body. Grif jerked up his bores's head and started away, but as he glanced back at Johnny his spleen rose up and choked him.

"Well, where's that smart pardner of yours?" he sneered. "Gone to hell? Did the Mexicans git him?"

"Not quite. He's gone to get a machine-gun-figures on standing them off with that."

"Oh! Gone, ch?" repeated Grif. "What did you come back for, then? I saw you talking to my wife when we came by here last time—figure on making a practice of that? I've taken about enough from that son-

of-a-which, Mark Trumbull—"

As if he had been waiting for the words, Kew jumped his horse against Lockhart's, almost knocking him out of the saddle.

"Take that back," he said, "or start shooting." And he slapped him across the face with his gauntlet.

"Why, Johnny!" exclaimed Salome, trying to steer her horse between them. "Grif didn't mean any harm."

"Out of the way!" he commanded; and for the first time one of the Wild Bunch spoke up.

"Look out, Grif," he warned. "He's fishing for a chance to kill you."

"Oh, is that it?" observed Lockhart, after a silence. "Well, come on, boys. Let's go."

"Yes, go ahead," twitted Johnny, "and I'll be going too. Down to the Line to show you cow-thieves how to steal cattle. And if anything happens while I'm gone"—he paused—"we'll come back with a couple of machine-guns and wipe you off the map."

He rode off, waving his hand at Bear Paw, and the rustlers followed on after their chief, and when Kew arrived at Chula Vista there was Mark Trumbull and his machine-gun. He had taken the new gun out of the grease and run through a couple of belts and the boys were ready to go. Men that Johnny and Mark had never seen but who had heard of their skill with the machine-guns, and before anything could happen to queer their run of luck they started across the Border.

Over sixty men—with a big bunch of spare horses, so nobody would have to walk back—and they went straight down the east side of the valley, in spite of the Villistas by the springs. It was a dare, a challenge to Pancho Villa himself, and they knew there would be a fight, but they made the start with a bellyful of beef, and whiskey enough for the return trip. All night they rode, when they were least expected; and at dawn, by the lower water, they rounded up their cattle and turned back.

There were scouts out, far ahead and off on the flanks, and in the lead a compact body of fighting men, all armed with high-powered rifles. Soldiers, cowboys, outlaws, adventurers—and, up in front, Mark Trumbull and his machine-gun, and Johnny to be his helper, or shoot. It was a business they knew well, after traveling with Villa, and as Mark looked over his men, he laughed.

"Johnny," he said, "the Villistas ran me ragged when I went back to dig up that gun. They knew me—and they knew my horse. Now I've got another gun, ten times as good, and all I hope is they'll come up close, so we can give them a taste of this."

He patted the heavy gun in its canvas case and the warriors were all a-grin, but as the day wore on and nothing happened they began to nod in their saddles. It was old stuff for most of them—they knew the country and the water and the tricks of the Durango bandits—but in the middle of the afternoon they ran spang into an ambush and two of the scouts went down.

From the finger of yuccas along the shore of a dry lake there came

a sudden fusillade—the bang-bang of old muskets, the rattle of thirtythirty, the sharp crack of long Mauser rifles. The advance guard halted, the flankers raced back, there was a yell from the Villa men, but all the time the cattle kept on, and the new machine-gun went into chattering action.

With a technique so practiced it had become almost a habit Mark and Kew, protected by a guard of rillemen, swung west to outlank the enemy. While the battle was going on they disappeared into the yuccas, edging closer until they sighted the huge hats of the Mexicans, every man dug in behind a soapweed. Then Kew set up the tripod, opened the ammunition-box and connected up the feed-belt. Mark estimated the distance, set his sights, tried a burst and unhooked the rest.

When the fusillade was over there were dead Mexicans everywhere, and the rest were fleeing for the hills. It was a grim game, this running out cattle, and they played it the Mexicans' way. Hardly had the bandits broken cover when the advance guard of cowboys was upon them, chasing them down like rabbits through the low brush and cactus and killing every man they caught. They had left their mounts behind to fight from ambush, and they paid for that mistake with their lives. It would be a long time before the bandits of Durango tried to fight the Gringos on foot.

The Villa cavalry came in on the run to support them, but they kept out of range of the dreaded ametralladora and the yellow-haired gunners who worked it. They knew who they were, for they had seen them with Villa and recognized good shooting when they saw it; but as evening came on they advanced in solid masses, to cut them off at the Line. To stampede their cattle under cover of the night and hold them up until dawn. Then, in one of the night charges for which Villa was famous, they would sweep in and shoot them down.

The sun set in flames as a sand-storm came on, and even Trumbull looked grim. This would hold the cattle back, but they drove ahead doggedly. Through they must go, until they reached the Line—and in the dark all men shoot high.

"Keep 'em moving," ordered Mark as he rode back along the herd; then he galloped ahead to where, like fire-flies in the gloom, the enemy guns blocked their way.

"We'll shoot our way through, boys," he said. "Hold low—and look out for a charge."

It came, just at dusk, and they set up their machine-gun while the first bullets whifted overhead. Then, as the black mass loomed up before them, they raked it from end to end and the cowboys set up a yell. This was what they had come for—what they had counted on to save their lives—and the ranks of rushing horsemen disappeared. Just the chatter of the machine-gun, the steady jet of flames, was sufficient to break their charge. Pancho Villa was not there with his death-dealing Dorados, ready to shoot the first Mexican that turned back. After all, this was just a cattle-stealing raid, but Amarillo was turning it into a war.

They knew him, this yellow-headed canary-bird that Don Pancho had named for his hair. They had seen him shoot before, and Juanito, his friend—they had seen them saw off a tree. A whole grove of trees, tumbling them down on the heads of their enemiss—and all the time Amarillo was laughing. It was men like that made night-charges dangerous and day-time charges sure death. They opened up the way to the Line, and before morning the herd was across.

Chapter XXVIII

T T HAD not been such a battle, after all, and only the two scouts had been killed. They had known their danger, but the Durango bandits had out-smarted them and caught them off their guard. Two of the fighting Irish—the first in every battle. They lashed them across their saddles and kept on. Many a drink was poured out for the rest of their souls as their comrades gathered at the bar.

For this great herd that they had put across the Line, the rustlers received thousands of dollars—an even half of all Mark took in when they delivered the cattle to Swope. More money than they had had in all their lives before, and they looked up to Trumbull like a god. But when they came back to start another raid Pancho Villa himself was waiting for them. Then the first cold blizzard of winter set in and the cattle-stealing business was over.

Let the Mexicans guard the Border if they wanted to—there would be no more raids till spring. Mark slipped away and hid his machinegun, the Diamond Bar boys went back to Swope, but most of the rustlers drifted back towards Pilares, regardless of the welcome they might get. They had shown Grif Lockhart how to bring out Mexican cattle, and the canyon was free to all.

Johnny Kew went along, to winter at Bear Paw Well, but the night before he left his pardner dropped out of sight. It was an easy way he had to avoid discussion—and Johnny knew what was on his mind. There had been a tear-stained letter from Salome, but Mark was not coming back. In the spring he would show up, after many strange adventures, and summon them all to the Line. For the greatest raid of all—against Pancho Villa himself—and the rustlers were counting the days.

Nothing had changed at the Well, except that Salome never came by. She had given up riding and retired to her bungalow—which was more Hollywood than Hollywood itself—and word came she was expecting a child. Sometime in the spring, and Lockhart looked grim. He had not counted on anything like that. But there she was and, early in the spring, he took her into town—to the hospital.

The flowers were out when he came back, wild-eyed and cursing everybody, and if they had had to wait on him they would not have got the news, never known what was burning him up; but a drunken cowboy had come riding hard ahead of him and announced that it was a boy. With yellow hair!

He galloped off up the canyon to share the news with the rustlers and from pity the Barrs stayed out of sight, but Dolores ran down to open the gate for them and Salome made Lockhart stop.

"Want to see my little baby?" she asked, and Dolores climbed up over the wheel.

"Come on down!" beckoned Salome, smiling up at the rest, and at last she had her way. It was as if all was regular and they strove to make it appear so, but Grif was looking death. With his head turned away he was talking to himself as he drove on in a cloud of dust. That night he disappeared, and all the Wild Bunch with him, while the rustlers took to the brush. From living so close to him they had lost all fear of Grif, but they were afraid some rascal would laugh.

A yellow-haired boy, eh? Well, well, this looks bad. I won't have no friend of mine abused, and Mr. Lockhart's hair is black!

They went racing past the house, bearing the news to far places where even Mark Trumbull might be hid, and Johnny's heart went out to the little stranger with his golden locks and bold, blue eyes. What a babyMark's boy—to go through life branded a bastard! To have it thrown up to him that Lockhart's hair was black and his mother's hair dark brown. If they could only steal him—he and Mark—and get him away from it all! What a boy he would be! A true son of battle, like his father; a man born to fight and overcome.

Johnny wrote a letter to Mark and sent it to a secret address; and into it crept a note of love that surprised even Kew himself. But the next morning, early, the peace officers were summoned and the country swarmed with armed men. The truth was out at last—Grif Lockhart was a train-robber and that night they had held up the Express. McDonald had said a hundred times that Barr was playing with a rattle-snake—that Lockhart was a murderer, a man without heart, and that the thing to do was to kill him. Kill him right now before he fanged one of them! But they had never got the chance. Now they understood what the Wild Bunch was for and cursed themselves for fools.

Every band must have its leader and Grif was that man. The Wild Bunch were killers, but Lockhart could think. He had learned before he came to Pilares to take any insult and wait—to let his enemies do anything when they had him in their power and wait for his chance to shoot. Well, he had struck, robbing the midnight Express at the junction, and the railroad detectives were everywhere.

The night before, at a station over east of Yermo, a lone man had swung up out of the darkness and covered the engine-crew with his gun. Another had uncoupled the express-car and they had pulled ahead to a siding, where four more robbers waited with horses. Horses, and dynamite enough to blast the car to pieces—but the messengers had opened the door. Every one agreed that it was an expert job, and they had cleaned out both the safes.

So this was the job which Lockhart had been planning, ever since he had come back across the Line! It looked to the officers as if even his wholesale rustling had been nothing but a blind. Under other names, Grif Lockhart and his gang had perpetrated a series of train robberies in the Northwest—before they had fled into Mexico. The officers at Yermo were ready to kick themselves for having let them escape—although all along they had known he was a bad one—a good man to let alone. It was known that he would shoot, and they were not hired to get killed. That was a job for the railroad detectives, who took up the trail at dawn.

But instead of heading straight for the Line, Grif Lockhart had ridden down to Pilares; and as she lay, still scared and shaking after their final quarrel, Salome heard his boots at the door. If she had not been brave she would never have come home with him in the first place—knowing the fate of his other woman—but at the sound of his voice her courage failed. She snatched up her baby and fled. One thing she knew—he had come to kill her—and she never stopped running through the thorny mesquite until she came to Mrs. Barr's door.

"What's the matter?" cried Bear Paw, springing up and grabbing his gun; but Rosita flung the door wide open and slammed it against the world,

"Ah, pobrecito—poor little one!" she sighed, snatching the baby as its mother staggered in. "Take her to the guest room, Carlos. I knew it all the time—her husband has tried to kill her."

"Yes, yes," sobbed Salome, sinking down inside the door; and Barr stepped out, gun in hand. There were men riding around through the brush, still seeking the woman to kill her, and to show that he was watching them, Barr emptied his rife at the dim, hostile figures in the dark. Then as dawn began to break they headed off towards the south, as bold and arrogant as Apaches, and Bear Paw let them go. When the first of the posses came galloping down the Wash Grif Lockhart had crossed into Mexico.

There was racing and chasing, clear to the Line, but when they got to Chula Vista they ran into a war. Pancho Villa was on the rampage, with thousands of soldiers, and no man was allowed to cross, Nobody wanted to cross, for Villa's Red Flaggers had taken over the country. Their battle-cry was "Death To All Gringos" and the Americans knew it meant them. Yet, somewhere in Mexico, were six men badly wanted—and there was talk about thirty-two more. Thirty-two rustlers, who had gone in to steal cattle, and had been wiped out to a man.

All three of the posses came back at once when they saw how dangerous it was, and when they stopped to talk with Bear Paw and Johnny, Salome drew near to listen. With Snookums in the baby-carriage and Dolores to push it she was pacing back and forth as if for air, but when a detective mentioned Chule Vista she stopped and let Dolores go on.

"No," he was saying, "they'll never be arrested. Not as long as this revolution keeps on. The whole country is swarming with Red Flaggers, and they'll kill every white man they catch."

"Oh, I don't know," began Barr, leaning back; and the detective resented his smile.

"You don't think so, eh?" he came back. "Let me tell you something, old-timer. Just before we left they rounded up thirty-two Americans that were down there stealing cattle—and shot every damned one of them!"

"What?" yelled Johnny Kew, jumping up; but Salome was there before him.

"Do you know the name of their leader?" she asked, "Not Mark? It wasn't Mark Trumbull?"

"How's that?" blinked the detective; and then he understood.

"W'y-er-yes," he said. "That was the name."

Chapter XXIX

"HE Mexicans," stated Johnny Kew, "are the damndest liars in the world. If you believe all the rumors you hear along the

Line—"
"But this ain't no rumor!" yapped back the detective. "This is a
well-known fact around Chula Vista. Villa let them ride sixty miles into
the interior, where they wouldn't have a chance to get away. Then he

closed in on them with a division of cavalry and shot down every man."
"You lie!" cried Salome in a fury; but Johnny still kept his head.
He was startled, dismayed, by the news of Mark's death; but what did
this man know about it?

"Hear anything about a machine-gun," he asked, "that the Americans had along? You're wrong then, It wasn't Mark!"

"It was Mark!" insisted the detective; and they had it back and forth

"Just a moment!" broke in Johnny, as he saw Salome totter; and he caught her in his arms as she fell.

"That man was her husband!" he hissed at the detective, and carried her into the house.

"Oh, Johnny," she moaned as he laid her on a bed. "I just know it wasn't Mark. It couldn't have been! Didn't he have a machine-gun?"

"This man is just a wind-bag," said Johnny. "Shooting off his head—telling the world what he heard when he was drunk in some saloon. Would Pancho Villa call out a whole division of cavalry to round up thirty-two men?"

"But—but at the same time, Johnny," she quavered, "Mark did have about thirty men. Do you think—it is possible? Go down and find out and come back and tell me before I go crazy—will you?"

"Sure I will!" he agreed, "but you stay right here! Don't get on your horse and ride down there, leaving your baby for strangers to take care of. Be reasonable while I go out and slap that bum's face off for telling such a lie about Mark!"

"Johnny," he said, "that rascal was lying, but go down and find out —will you? It makes me feel sick, just to think of it—"

"I'm going!" nodded Kew. "Right now!"

It all seemed so foolish, so utterly unreasonable; and yet as he rode towards the Line, Johnny felt a queer sinking of the heart. Mark had said that Villa was down there, waiting for them, determined to stop the rustling; and when Pancho Villa made up his mind to stop something he would do it if it took a regiment. But a division—three brigades —five or ten thousand men—that was pulling it pretty strong.

Chula Vista was full of Americans, drunk and sober, but nobody seemed to know anything. All they knew was that Mark had not come back. Six days now—and there had been fighting down below. Mexican deserters were drifting in, and they all said the Americans had been killed. Pancho Villa had let them go in, watching their dust from the eastern hills. Then he had swooped down and killed every one of them. Johnny crossed the Line into Mexican-town, taking a chance to get the real news; and as he crossed he saw a man watching him.

A tall, swarthy fellow, in the clothes of a country Mexican. Kew looked at him again, out of the corner of his eye, Yes, he knew him—but who was he? Some man he had met under tragic circumstances. In battle, perhaps—but no, he could not place him. And yet it was necessary to find out who he was, for he might be a Villa spy. One of a hundred, perhaps, sent up to the Border to cut off men like him.

Kew went back into Chula Vista to think it over, and ran right into Ben Swope.

"What?" yelled Swope. "You back? That pardner of yours is a--"
"Never mind." broke in Kew. "What about Mark? Is he killed?"

"Never mind," broke in Kew. "What about Mark? Is he killed?"

Swope stared at him, as if astounded by his ignorance—then laughed

an ugly laugh.
"They're all killed," he said, "the whole damned outfit. And here I

"They're all killed," he said, "the whole damned outht. And here I am without a single cowboy left—they thought it was going to be easy. That pardner of yours was the damndest fool of all!"

"Who told you all this?" demanded Johnny; but Swope could only shrug.

"Everybody knows it," he said. "They've been gone for over six days."

"Oh, hell," grunted Kew and turned away; but at the same time it dolok bad. They had had a battle, that was sure; and none of them had come back, that was sure. But they might not have been killed—they might have scattered and hid. Mark might have been wounded, he might have been captured; but Johnny could not think of him as dead. He was a man who spit up bullets, like the legendary Heraclio Bernal; or led a charmed life, like Villa. He was a man who laughed at death; who, even if he was hurt, would come out of it someway, somehow.

But he might be lying wounded under a bunch of solol, waiting for his old compadre to come down and find him—and what were pardners for, anyway? Johnny rode off to the east, where the boys had gone in, and found their old trail leading south; but just as he started in he saw two Mexicans from town, riding out to intercept him. Two! He laughed and stepped off behind Capitan—the horse that was so beautiful that no Mexican would shoot him, so valuable they would risk their lives to get him!

Kew pulled out his rifle and was looking them over through his sights when one of the Mexicans raised his hand. It was the man who had been watching him when he crossed over into Mexican-town—before he thought better of it and turned back. But even yet he could not place him. Johnny held up his hand and beckoned him to approach, and as the leader rode in, he remembered him. He was one of the Morales brothers who had stopped to talk with Bear Paw before they went up the canyon to kill Lockhart. The youngest—the one who had escaped!

"Oh! Excuse me!" said Johnny, as he advanced to shake hands. "I did not know you were in town. But you are one of the brothers Morales--" "The same!" bowed the Mexican, and took his hand. "I rode out to warn you that this way is watched. And, anyway, your compadre has been killed. I knew him by his horse—the same as I know you—and I saw him when he died. He was a brave man truly, but the Villistas were too many, and Don Pancho had sworn to get him. So, first, he drove all the cattle ahead of them; and then, with many men, he made an ambuscade, far out in the middle of the valley.

"I was with the cavalry," he went on, "but we saw it from the hills. There was a great battle—all their horses were killed—but they dug in and made a fight. I could hear their machine-gun firing."

"God!" exclaimed Johnny. "It was Mark!"

"Yes, I am sorry, it was your friend. He fought off our soldiers till dark, and then his machine-gun stuck. We could hear it stop and start—and Villa saw his chance. He ordered in his cavalty—every squadron he had. They charged in—they rode over them—they killed them. That was the chance I was waiting for—I left and rode to the Line. But when I saw your palomillo I was reminded of him—and then I remembered you. And when I saw you riding off I said to my brother,"—he jerked his head towards the boy who was with him—"'José, this is too good a man to be killed. He is riding down to find his companion, not knowing that he is already dead.'

"So we came out to warn you, before it was too late. I remembered your good friend, Don Carlos. He offered to help me and my brothers."

"Yes. A thousand thanks," sighed Kew; and stood looking off to the south.

"Do not think of going further," begged Morales. "The Villistas will surely kill you. It will not be an easy death."

"No," agreed Johnny; but he did not turn back, and Morales tried again.

"Do you remember the five Texans and the man who was their chief

the man we followed to kill?"

"Yes!" answered Kew. "What about them?"

"My brother has just come with bad news. They are back at Rosario, my home."

"All of them?" challenged Johnny. "When did they come?"

"Two weeks ago," replied José. "I have come for my brother to help kill them."

"Perhaps I could be of some assistance," said Kew, and he saw their manner change.

"Come with me." beckoned Ricardo, turning back, "If you will stand

up against these dogs of Texanos we will give you anything. Anything! And they have brought back much gold—*muchos!*"

Chapter XXX

HEN Kew became convinced that his pardner was lost a deathly apathy came over him, and he did not much care what happened. He answered Yes and No to the remarks of Morales without listening to what he said, but when they took him into a cantina and gave him a drink, the bite of the mescal brought him to himself. They sat down in a corner, where no one would hear them, and Ricardo went on with his tale.

"Rosario," he said, "is a poor town now, with not more than twenty inhabitants. Ever since the great battle, when our houses were blown down or destroyed by the pioneers with dynamite, the people have been moving away. But two weeks ago this Greef came back and occupied the house he once owned. The very house, Señor, where he killed my sister—and more of the inhabitants fled. But the Morales—no. We are a big family, and we have not forgotten the shame that he brought to our sister. To be found lying dead, as she was, with her lover's brains on her breast—that is too great a disgrace!"

"Yes," agreed Kew, and listened, while wild plans took form in his mind. In Rosario, far away from prying sheriffs and the tag-ends of American law, a final blow might be struck that would wipe old Grif off the earth. Remove him forever from Salome's life and save Snookums from the name of a bastard, Salome was young, she would marry again, and no one would ever know the color of her first husband's hair. But this black-haired brute who could murder his wife in her sleep—it was a good time for him to die.

"When they came," went on Morales, pouring out another drink, "they brought two mule-loads of what we think is gold, besides their

other plunder. All this is yours, of course, if you will help us kill these *ladrónes* and wipe out our sister's shame."

"Yes," nodded Johnny, "I will try. After I bury my friend's body."

"He is buried, long ago, and all his friends with him. And do you know what I have heard? On the hills around—and piled up in front of them —Villa found three hundred and eighteen of his soldiers. The Americans had taken shelter behind their blanket-rolls, which alone would break the force of the bullets, and for every shot they fired they killed a Mexican—until at last the cavalry rode them down. Now Villa is so mad he is out of his head, and even his Dorados are afraid."

"Very well," sighed Kew. "If he is buried, already-"

"He is buried with so many you would never find his body. But this Greef—do you not wish to kill him? Think of the gold and silver that will be yours! And perhaps Don Carlos would help!"

"Seguro que st!" nodded Johnny, rousing up. "I will go back and tell him your story. And, against so many desperate outlaws, I will need another man's help."

"You will need many men," returned Morales. "But if more than two or three cross the Line together, the Villistas will find their tracks the next morning and kill them."

"To be sure," responded Kew. "I had not thought of that. All my mind is back there where my compadre lies dead, but Don Carlos will attend to these robbers. They have lived in that canyon where your brothers were killed, stealing cattle and making trouble for a year. But now that they have moved back to Rosario we will ride down and, with your help, kill them."

"But when?" inquired Ricardo. "I must know just when to expect you. They will be watching the trails, and if they see you first—"

"We will come in a few days," promised Johnny, "and you will know me by my horse."

"Excuse me," corrected Morales, "but so will your enemies. It was the fine horse he rode that betraved Yellow Head to Villa."

"Then I will ride another horse," agreed Kew. "But Don Carlos has served in the Texas Rangers and we must leave all the planning to him. Go back to Rosario and ride out every morning as if you were working your cattle. I will wave my hat in a circle when I see you and you will move yours up and down."

"Good!" answered Ricardo, rising up to shake hands; and Johnny

rode off through the night. He might as well ride since he could not sleep, now that he knew his pardner had been killed; and to carry out this attack on Lockhart and his Wild Bunch fell in very well with his mood. He felt that uneasiness, that urge for battle, which had seized upon him so many times before. It would help him forget the loss of his friend to wipe out this man they hated.

But when he sighted Bear Paw Well and saw Salome coming to meet him, he felt at a loss for words. What could he say to her? And how would she take it? Now that Mark was gone, he must tell her the truth; and yet this would be a blow. She came on at a gallop—the crazy way she always rode; but when she waved her hand he did not answer back. There was no use—her lover was dead.

"Oh! Oh, Johnny!" she gasped, as she caught his first word but she could not give up hope.

"Did you find him? Did you see him?" she clamored; and suddenly her nerve came back. "Then he isn't dead at all!" she declared, "Something tells me—I know it. He'll come back."

"Well—maybe," he shrugged; but as he told her the story her courage broke. She slumped down on the ground and wept.

"You might've gone down and looked for him," she wailed. "He'd've done that much for you. But no, you take a Mexican's word for it, and I'll never see my Mark again."

"No," he said. "You never will. And I won't see him again, either. If there had even been a chance of seeing him alive—"

"I'd have gone—I'd have found him!" she sobbed. "You didn't love him the way I did. He was just your friend and so—"

"Here, now!" protested Johnny, lifting her up, "I won't have you talking like that. I thought more of Mark than any man in the world. He was my pardner—we were compadres."

"But I know!" she cried. "I just know he isn't dead. I wake up at night and I can hear him calling me. Oh, Johnny—won't you go back?" She threw her arms around his neck and pressed her cheek against his, and for the first time he felt his heart go out to her.

"Please, Johnny," she pleaded, raising her lips to his; and before he knew it he had kissed her.

"All right," he said, holding her close, "I'll go down and get killed, too. I would have if I hadn't met this Mexican who told me where your husband was." "My husband!" she repeated, pushing him away. "You mean Grif Lockhart, I guess, but don't you dare to call him that again. But have you—" She paused and looked at him strangely and a faint smile twisted her lips. "Were you—going to kill him?" she asked.

"Why—yes," he said, "I was."

"Then you do it!" she decided. "I might have been wrong. It may be that Mark is dead. But how could we be happy, even if he came back, as long as Grif was alive? Oh, I hate him so I would give anything—anything—"

"You don't need to," he said. "I was going down after him. I've got to do it—for the baby."

"Oh, Johnny!" she beamed. "You do love him—don't you? I've been trying so hard to act like a lady so he never would be ashamed. Haven't you noticed? But I was doing it for Mark."

"Yes, I've noticed," he said, lifting her up on her horse; and she burst out crying again.

"You do it just like him," she sobbed. And he smiled at her as they rode away.

Chapter XXXI

THERE was a grim look on Bear Paw's face as he stood by his telescope and waited; and Johnny realized that he had been watching them all the time. It had hardly been the time to be seen kissing Salome—and Mark barely buried in his grave. And always before he had hated her. Now he knew that, when she wished, she could win him over; make him kiss her in spite of himself. But his nerves were shaken, he was hardly himself, and Uncle Charley would understand.

Barr sat back, smiling gravely as Kew looked at Snookums, carefully tended in his carriage by Dolores; and while Johnny told his story he listened in silence—until the name of Lockhart came up.

"You say you've got him located?" he repeated, and motioned Dolores away—Dolores and Salome, who was lingering near—then he moved over closef and waited.

"You're tired, Johnny," he said, when Kew had finished. "Go down

and sleep while I think this over—I believe I'd better wire for McDonald. These detectives are out of the way—Villa has swept the country clean—and it looks like a good time to strike."

Johnny slept the clock around—and the next day Sandy was there, sitting under the ramada with Barr. Big, burly, unsmiling, showing his buck-teeth as he talked—and when they saw Kew, Bear Paw beckoned him over,

"Just a moment, Johnny," he said, "before you go into the house. This is supposed to be an expedition to look for Mark—nothing said about those rascals at Rosario."

"I understand," nodded Kew; and after breakfast they went into conference.

"Now, first of all," began Sandy, "how much confidence have you got in the word of a Mexican? That's all you've got to prove that those train-robbers are at Rosario, and that their packs are full of gold."

"Just as much as I have in the word of an American, when I know where his interest lies. The whole Morales family is out to get Lockhart, and that's why they've called us in."

"Before we go any further," broke in Barr, "there's one question I want to ask. Are you satisfied that Mark Trumbull is dead? This Mexican told you he was, but maybe he had a reason for that. He knew if you went down after him you'd probably get killed—and he wanted you to clean up on Grif."

"That's right," agreed Johnny. "But I'm not taking his word alone. I met Ben Swope at Chula Vista and he said every man had been killed. If I didn't believe Mark was dead I wouldn't be here, talking."

"No, I know that," responded Bear Paw, gently, "but we don't need to mention it to Salome."

"I've told her, already," answered Kew; and the two old rangers exchanged glances.

"Well, what did she say?" they asked.

"She said that she just knew that Mark was alive and made me promise to go back and look for him. But when she heard that I'd located Grif—she begged me to go down and kill him."

"Uhhr!" grunted McDonald scornfully; but Uncle Charley only nodded.

"I understand," he said, and Johnny blushed again. Barr knew that Salome had been working on him when she kissed him—that she, too,

wanted Grif killed. "Well," he went on, "Tm a family man, myself, and I've got Rosita to consider; but if you boys are game I'm for going to Rosario and—"

"Game!" laughed Sandy. "I've been begging you to start all day. It's the chance of a lifetime to ride in and git 'im. And I'll tell you one thing—we're going to take some dynamite. I don't mind admitting—between friends, you understand—I used some, once before. Across the river from Presidio, in the Big Bend country—we got our powder at the Shafter Mine."

"Umm," meditated Barr. "I think I know where I can get some."

"A hundred pounds," specified McDonald, "with fuse and Judson caps. And be damned sure that fuse is fresh. These explosions have got to be timed to a fraction of a second—and we'll blow that house to hell." Bear Paw gazed at him a long time, thinking.

"I get the idea," he said at last. "But remember, gentlemen, when you're speaking before Rosita, we're going down to hunt for Mark!"

They started after dark, like a bunch of rustlers, and hid out near Monument Sixty-six. Two days later they came in sight of Rosario and stopped to look it over through their glasses. It stood on the top of a low hill, a cluster of mud houses so torn down and blasted to pieces that it hardly seemed inhabited at all. At the foot of the bench, where the water-hole lay, there was a dense thicket of mesquites; a wooded mountain rose behind; but for a hundred miles north and south it looked out on the Animas Valley, a waste of yuccas and desert sand.

"Too onen," pronounced Bear Paw, "Well have to hide up some

canyon and try to slip in after dark."

"Better wait," suggested McDonald, "until Johnny finds Morales,

"Better wait," suggested McDonald, "until Johnny finds Morales. We might walk into some trap."

"Well—we'll wait, then," decided Barr. "But the quicker we pull this off—"

"It ain't being quick—it's being sure you're right. I want to know the exact house—and just where they sleep in it—and let the dynamite do the rest. That ain't very sporting, but we ain't dealing with sports. They've robbed the train, they know they'll be followed, and they'd bore any one of us for a dime. What would you do, Mr. Kew?"

"Find Morales," answered Johnny, "and see how the ground lays.

I'll have him make me a map. Then, the first time we slip in there, we'll go right to the spot. We don't want to tip our hand."

"No," agreed McDonald, "and whatever you do, don't tell this Mex where our camp is. I've had trouble with them hombres before and I don't noways trust 'em, Get his story and his map and then we'll look the ground over. And tell him we don't need no help. I'd rather pull this off alone than have a bunch of Mexicans on our hands."

They were well hid up a canyon before the sun was an hour high, and Kew climbed up on a point to watch. But right there their troubles began. The valley below Rosario was deserted all day. Nobody rode forth, either to scout or to work cattle. They did not even know that Morales was alive—the robbers might have spotted him and killed him.

"That's the Mex of it," grumbled Sandy. "Never keep their word about anything. We'd better sneak in ourselves and see if old Grif is there. He may be a thousand miles from here."

It was late—nearly midnight—before they made their start and there wasn't a light in town. It stood out in the ghostly moonlight, a mass of square, black shadows, and McDonald went in alone. Down by the spring, where Barr and Kew waited, a bunch of wild cattle drifted in and then stampeded. Then a dog in the village barked. Then another—a hundred—and when Sandy came back he mounted without a word and rode away.

"Can't do a damned thing, with them dogs loose," he cursed. "We'll have to find this man Morales and get him to shut 'em up. You can't get into town."

The next morning, early, a waguero appeared, combing the plain for a beef to kill; but Johnny could not get near him, no matter how much he waved his hat. If it was Ricardo, he had learned a great fear of strangers since they had parted at Chula Vista; and at last the man rode back—with the beef. He circled behind the town and came up by another trail, and that was the last of him. The third day the same, and there was dust to the north; but the next morning at dawn, far out in the valley, Kew spied a lone horseman, riding hard.

Their food was running low, McDonald was hollering for action, but Johnny rode out slowly. These Mexicans were as hard to approach as a mountain-sheep; and when, down on the flat, he sighted his man he was going by at a gallop. Kew waved his hat, he moved it up and down, but the vaquero did not break his pace. Still riding at a gallop he disappeared among the yuccas; only to show up, an hour later, going the other way. But standing in his stirrups—he was looking!

house."

Johnny flagged him—they approached each other warily; until at last, catching sight of Kew's yellow hair, Ricardo gave a shout and rode in.

"Is it you then, amigo?" he hailed. "I have been looking for you for days. But three strange Americans have been watching our village and no man has dared to leave town."

"Three!" repeated Kew. "Have you seen them?"

"No, but we found their tracks by our spring, all riding big horses—shod!"

"That was me and my two friends," explained Johnny. "Don Carlos and an old Texas Ranger."

"A Texano?" cried Ricardo, shying off. "They are not good friends of my people."

"No," acknowledged Kew. "But you do not need to meet him. We three will do all the fighting. Make me a map, showing the house where Greef lives. Then shut up all your dogs; and we will come this very night."

"Ah! Catch the dogs, eh?" exclaimed Morales, and fell to laughing. "Then you still have a use for me, Amigo?"

"Yes!" admitted Johnny. "We cannot do without you. It is important to catch every dog."

"I will kill another beef," suggested Ricardo, "and that will bring them in. Then, after dark, we will shut them all up!"

them in. Then, after dark, we will shut them all up!"
"Every dog!" repeated Kew, "or we are ruined. Now make me a
good map on this paper I have brought, and keep all your people in the

"But why?" demanded Morales, suspiciously. "Do you want all the gold for yourself?"

"I will tell you," confided Johnny. "There will be a great explosion.

"Perfectly!" grinned Ricardo, and squatted down to draw the map. "My family will be very glad."

Chapter XXXII

In the chill of early dawn, with sacks tied over their boots, the three Americans climbed the trail into Rosario. McDonald had taken charge and, under his arm, he carried a tight bundle of dynamite. Barr bore the other and Johnny Kew followed, to shoot any outlaw who escaped after the blast. This was a job for the Rangers to execute, and they left him behind, out of their way. It called for cold nerve and the ability to set off their dynamite so that the explosions would be timed to a split second.

They had been practicing that all day. The second hands of their watches were synchronized to a hair, and the fact that they were due to kill six Americans in their sleep did not worry them in the least. They had spotted the house through their glasses, and they knew where each charge was to be set. And if, inside those walls, six train-robbers were blown to hell that was something for the Recording Angel to take care of.

It was still, in Rosario, Not a dog barked or whimpered. They were so full of beef that they slept like the dead in the house where Ricardo had trapped them. Only a distant rooster crowed his summons to the sun, which was just beginning to glow in the east. Behind the blackened wall of a burned-out house Johnny shifted back and forth, listening nervously. At the last moment, standing idle, his thoughts began to race. He pictured Bear Paw and Sandy, timing their watches for the last time before they crept to the opposite corners of the house. Them—

But nothing happened—the stillness was unbroken, except for a soft, rustling sound. It came closer—it was the pounding of muffled feet. Barr and Sandy ran silently past him, beckoning him on. Their work was done, the fuses were lit, but another job awaited his hand. Suppose the dynamite failed, suppose the train-robbers escaped—it was up to him, on the heels of the explosion, to rush in and shoot them down. Kill without mercy; men who would kill him. Get Lockshart at any cost.

It seemed so long that he was looking around the corner when a blast of air knocked him flat. His ears were deafened by an impact that made the earth leap and rock. He was blinded by a flare that leapt to high heaven; and when he rose up, stumbling, there was still a glare of light, and green smoke rising in a whirl. It turned to a cloud of dust—from the powdered adobes—still swirling up to the sky; and in the midst of it, dodging crazily in and out, he saw a tall man, running.

A tall man with a beard who looked like Grif. Johnny snapped up his rifle—fired! He ran in closer and fired again. But nothing seemed to check this flying dervish, this man all legs and arms who whirled in a dizzy circle, in and out. Kew's hands were shaking, he dropped down and took a rest; but every shot went wild. Then Bear Pawan dh Cobonald came rushing up behind him. They all shot, but the man kept on. Johnny paused, caught his breath, held close and fired again, and the man in the dust-cloud went down.

He was up again, as if the bullet had only sobered him—brought him out of his daze by its bite. They saw him straighten up and run down the hill—smash into the mesquite thicket—plunge out of sight. It was Grif, Johnny knew it by the hump on his back, and he took after him through the brush. He lost the trail, picked it up again and found a little pool of blood—but Lockhart had leapt up and run on.

Kew burst out into the open, torn and mangled by the thorns; and before him, afoot and on horseback like a pack of hounds, the Morales Clan led the way. They had witnessed the explosion, the shooting, the escape; and when Greef broke cover they were upon him. There was a fusillade of shots, a swarming in of men swinging machetes—and Johnny turned away. Grif was dead.

He was dead in the Mexican definition of the word, which leaves no room for a coming back to life. As Kew toiled back up the hill Ricardo rode past him and slapped a gold ring in his hand.

"Recuerdo de Rosario!" he quoted; and Kew gazed at the bloody souvenir. He had seen it on the finger of Grif Lockhart, who would kill no more women in their sleep.

The Morales brothers thundered by, grinning radiantly, and Johnny followed on to Greef's house. It had disappeared, as far as walls were concerned, the mud bricks blown a hundred feet away or powdered into fine dust. But, except for two holes at the corners, the floors were still intact, and McDonald was on it, digging. First at the shattered corners, then by the fire-place, he snatched up the loosened tiles, and the Mexicans exchanged glances. They shrugged. But when with a quick grab he snatched up a heavy begt they swarmed about Ricard about Ricard.

"Ah! Aha!" grunted Sandy, and fetched out another—and another.
"You are satisfied?" inquired Bear Paw politely.

"Yes!" Ricardo answered grimly. "That was part of our bargain. Let the Gringo dig for his gold."

McDonald seized an iron rod and began to root deeper, but when he unearthed a fourth buried sack the Mexicans rushed in to look. Sandy glanced up, the sweat coursing down his cheeks, and handed it over to Barr. Then he set himself to uproot the hearth-stone and the Morales Clan waited expectantly.

"Better let it lay!" advised Bear Paw; and McDonald caught the change in his voice—the warning to let well enough alone. It was going to be quite a strain on Mexican good-nature to see all that treasure carried away, and they were forty miles below the Line. Mac settled himself again—stopped to think—and Ricardo spoke again.

"No!" he said to his protesting gente. "Our sister is avenged—let the Texano dig!"

"I believe, Mr. McDonald," suggested Bear Paw suavely, "you have got about all you can pack."

"Damn right," agreed Sandy, crawling out of the hole; and with a bag apiece they left there. There was something about that word "Texano" that had a hostile ring—and it was a long way to the Line.

Chapter XXXIII

T was a long, hard ride to Monument Sixty-six, but they made it on the run. Not all the way, but as fast as the horses could travel, and when they stopped the animals laid down. The mule that had carried the dynamite laid down, too, and McDonald unlashed his pack.

"Now!" he said, "we'll see what we got."

"No we won't!" vetoed Bear Paw. "That's worse than dynamite this close to the Line. Just a few miles further, Mr. McDonald. I've got my family to consider."

"Well, perhaps you're right," admitted Sandy. "But here, boys, let's talk this over, before we meet up with someone that might not understand. This gold was stole from the Express Company—what? And they's thirty thousand dollars reward. But we didn't bring back the bodies of them train-robbers and they's no legal proof that they're dead. You know as well as I do, Charley, that they'll never pay us a cent."

"That's right," agreed Barr, "I've known a twenty thousand dollar reward to shrink to eight-hundred cash,"

"Well, here's the proposition," went on Sandy, "and I've thought it out very carefully. We've rendered that Express Company a great service, that can't be measured in dollars and cents. We've killed off a passel of train-robbers that have done them a world of damage-and was due to deal them more. Off-hand I'd say that a hundred thousand dollars wouldn't half pay for what we've saved them. But if we go ahead and turn in this loot, we'll never get a cent,"

"Very ably presented," observed Barr, "How do you feel about it, Kew? Shall we just keep this treasure, whatever it is, and cross it off on the books; or shall we turn it all in and try to collect the reward?"

"Well-" began Johnny: but Sandy stopped him.

"And that ain't all," he said. "This loss is all covered by insurance. If we turn the money back it's no gain to the Company, because they couldn't collect. But if the insurance company gets stuck-"

"They've been getting their premiums for years," put in Barr: and Johnny threw up his hands.

"All right, gentlemen," he said, "I'll agree, After pulling off what we have and coming out of it alive-"

"That's the idea!" grinned Sandy, "I knowed you'd understand, I've been a Ranger, myself, and I stand for the law-but lawyers are something else. So we'll just divide this up and say nothing to nobody. We started out to find Mark Trumbull and we haven't found him-savvy? That's our story and we'll stick to it."

He held out his hairy paw and they shook hands all around, And when, that night, they examined the loot they found they had collected in full. Thirty thousand dollars and then some, They could afford to be generous, and Bear Paw led the way.

"I move, gentlemen," he said, "that we give the balance to the widow of the man that stole it. And the widow-to-be, you might say, of the man we were supposed to be hunting for. Losing both her menfolks at once is going to be pretty rough on Salome, but maybe somebody will marry her for her money."

He glanced across at Johnny, who shook his head.

"Not me," he stated. "But she'll need it for Snookums. So somebody can tell her it came out of Mark's money-belt and—"

"I'll do that myself," volunteered Barr; and Kew accepted the offer.

"Thanks," he said. "I guess you understand it wouldn't be easy for me. And after it's all over I'm going back to Chula Vista and—"

"No!" broke in Bear Paw; but Johnny shook his head.

"All the same," he repeated, "I'm going."

They watered their horses and camped away from the spring, where no one could find them and rob them; and the next morning, worn and bearded, they rode in towards Bear Paw Well with their loot tied up in their slickers. It looked very homelike and peaceful, that low white house on the hill, and as they came across the sink a woman rode out to meet them.

"Oh, my God!" sighed Kew, "have I got to go through that all over again? We haven't found Mark and we've killed old Grif—who's going to explain that to Salome?"

"Didn't she beg you to kill him?" demanded Barr. "What's the use of letting her run it over you? You leave her to me and Sandy—I'll begin by giving her the money."

"That'll shut her up," observed McDonald, cynically; then he squinched down his eyes and looked ahead. "Say!" he exclaimed. "That horse has got a colt. That ain't Salome—it's Engracia!"

"Sure enough!" agreed Bear Paw, and smiled as he watched her come.
"Well, this is her home," he said at last. "I don't see why Salome should drive her out of it, now that old Grif is dead. Engracia must have heard about Salome kissing Juanito and—"

"What's that?" inquired Johnny, straightening up; but ${\bf Barr}$ wore a poker face.

"Her mother must have told her," he went on.

"She's turning off!" said Sandy. "Must be afraid her papacito will scold her for running away from school."

"Not much!" answered Bear Paw. "I'm too glad to see her back again—and ain't she having a good time!"

He waved his hand and laughed, but Engracia shied away, riding farther and farther to the west—on and on, with the grace of an Indian, until she turned and swung back towards the house. And all the time, chasing after them, the little colt frisked and played. "She's just bashful," chuckled Bear Paw. "Better ride out and join her, Mr. Kew."

He glanced over at Johnny, who was watching her intently.

"Thank you, Mr. Barr," he said. "She might not understand."

Chapter XXXIV

T ** WAS more than possible, thought Kew, that Engracia had left the ranch to get away from her enemy. At their last meeting—long ago, in the corral—Salome had slapped her flat, and Engracia was not one to forget. But when they rode up and he looked around, Mrs. Lock-hart was nowhere in sight. Dolores came running and scrambled up into her father's arms; Rosita gave her husband a kiss; then Dolores crept closer and kissed Johnny too.

"That is from Engracia," she whispered.

"Yes?" he smiled, and Mrs. Barr stood beaming.

"My daughter has come home," she announced.
"I am very glad," he answered formally; and hurried away to clean

up. But hardly had he got the lather on his chin when Dolores popped in through the door. "Do you know where Mrs. Lockhart has gone?" she asked. "Back

"Do you know where Mrs. Lockhart has gone?" she asked. "Back home—up the canyon. She took Snookums."

"What? Back to Pilares? What's the matter?"

"A man came by and told her something and she started right back home."

"Was she mad?" he inquired at last.

"Why, no!" smiled Dolores. "She laughed all the time."

"O-oh!" said Kew, but his eyes were a little wild when he went back up to the house.

"She's gone," admitted Barr. "Well, sit down, Johnny; I can't quite make this out. Rosita says that Salome has gone kind of crazy. She thinks Mark is still alive and will come back looking for her, any time; so she's gone back to her bungalow to wait. Old Sam, the cook, came down and talked with her and she moved right back, the same day. And

laughing all the time-what do you think of that? We'd better go up and see her."

"All right," sighed Kew. "And take that money with us. But remember—you do the talking."

The afternoon sun lit up Salome's Hollywood bungalow and made it look almost homelike; and when they rode up closer they could hear the phonograph running. Then a high, throaty laugh, and they looked at each other.

"She's taking it hard," observed Bear Paw sarcastically; but Johnny held up his hand. A man's voice, big and loud, was laughing back.

"She's got company," he said at last.

"Better look things over," suggested Barr, "before we give her that money. I hate to say it, Johnny, but she don't seem to be a one-man woman."

"No," grunted Kew and his eyes were grim as he stepped off and rapped at the door. There was a silence within as somehoot turned off the music, and Salome peeped out through a crack. She was dressed in her best, her eyes were alight—and when she saw who it was she laughed.

"Why, Johnny!" she exclaimed. "Are you back already? I thought you were hunting for Mark."

"Nope," he said, and glanced at Barr; who started to make his speech.

"Mrs. Lockhart," he began; and she stopped him right there.

"Don't call me by that name or I'll kill you!" she stormed; and Bear Paw started again.
"Well, the point is." he said, "we couldn't find Mark. But the bar-

well, the point is, he said, we couldn't find mark. But the barkeep in the Chula Vista saloon had some money he'd left there for you and—"

"Oh! Money, eh?" she laughed. "Hand it over—I can use it!" But Uncle Charley shook his head.

"No! This money was for Snookums and—who's the man in there?"
"None of your business!" she flared back. "Did you find the body,
Mr. Kew?"

"No!" answered Johnny. "What the hell are you laughing at?"

"Come in here!" she commanded, throwing the door wide open; and there in a chair and holding the baby was Mark Trumbull, in the flesh.

But not the same Mark. His face was pale, there was a scar across his brow, and one eye had a sinister droop.

"Do you know him?" demanded Salome, triumphantly. "Now come through and give me that money!"

"Er—what's that?" stammered Johnny, as Mark regarded him unsmilingly; and Trumbull began to curse.

"Damn liar!" he declared. "I never left any money, The Villistas stripped me clean."

"Well—Mark!" exclaimed Kew, holding out his hand; but his old pardner had returned a changed man. He sat in scowling silence, ignoring the hand.

"I don't know you!" he said. "To hell with you and your money. If Salome isn't good enough to associate with you, or stay in Mrs. Barr's house—"

"But Mark!" protested Johnny. "There must be some mistake. When did I ever say--"

"Every time she'd come by and stop to talk you'd send Dolores back to the house! If that ain't saying it—what is? And just because Snookums has got yellow hair—"

"Aw, Mark!" begged Kew. "Don't talk like that. You know we just love that baby. And didn't Mrs. Barr take them in when old Grif tried to kill him?"

"Wha-at!" yelled Trumbull, glaring at Salome accusingly.

"I—I didn't tell you!" she faltered. "But he did—he tried to kill Snookums."

"Well, damn me!" cried Mark, rising up in a pet; and Salome dropped to her knees.

"Honest, Mark; honest!" she pleaded. "I wasn't trying to make trouble!"

"You were, too!" he said putting the baby in its cradle. "Now what's this about the money?"

"Well," began Barr, "we knew she was all alone—and at that time we figured you were dead—so—"

"Oh! Charity, hey?" sneered Mark; and Johnny looked him in the eye.

"Yes!" he said. "What's wrong about that? Seems to me you're damned hard to suit!"

"Well-I am!" admitted Mark; and for the first time he smiled.

- "It's no crime to try to help her out-"
- "But we did it for the kid!" explained Kew.
- "And you don't like Salome at all, eh? She told me all about it."

"Never mind about that—it was Snookums we were thinking of. We want him to have a chance to grow up a good man—"

"Like his father, eh?" grinned Mark.

"Sure!" laughed Johnny, holding out his hand; and this time Trumbull took it.

"All right, Johnny," he said, "I got you wrong again. Sit down—let's talk this over."

Chapter XXXV

ow does it come, Mr. Trumbull," inquired Bear Paw, "that you happen to be here, alive? Everybody said you were dead."
"Well, leave it that way," suggested Mark, mysteriously.
"Until I decide to come back to life. Ever hear of these Dorados that Pancho Villa sends out? He just gives them a man's name and they keep after him till they get him. I'm up here on the dodge. Did you bove some back from Chula Vistaz"

"Yes and no!" spoke up Bear Paw promptly, "but mostly we went farther west. What did you have in mind?"

"Just wondering if some Dorado had tagged you in here. But he-ell—I'm supposed to be dead."

He laughed and felt of the wound across his brow, and Salome fingered it lovingly.

"I just knew he wasn't," she said. "Didn't I tell you so, Johnny? Of

course!"

"Never mind, now!" admonished Mark. "And don't try to fool me, showing how much you love old Johnny. This is twice now you've tried to get me mad at him, so beat it and open up some beer."

Salome made a face—over his head—at Kew; and Trumbull felt the wound again.

"After that," he said, "I can claim the record for a close shave on going to hell. A Mauser bullet knocked me cold, just before the cavalry

charged, and I woke up under a pile of dead men while they were searching bodies for loot. I was just as good as dead and I played 'possum, to fool 'em, but when they found my money-belt, and my pearl-handled pistol, they knew I was something special. So when Villa came by they pointed me out to him, and old Pancho threw a fit. I was just the man he was looking for, and when he discovered I was still alive he decided to make an example of me. No stabbing me in the belty and leaving me for the buzzards—he told them to take good care of me.

"It seems," he went on, "he'd been hearing through the papers about the World War over in Europe, and how the Germans chained the gunners to their machine guns and left them to protect their retreat.

"'Keep him alive,' he says, 'and dig out that machine-gun. I'm going to get paid for the men he's killed and take it out of the Federals' hides.'

"So they nursed me along until I could serve the gun again and staged an etreat for the purpose; but when they left me in that Pass, chained and tied up and everything, I tore myself loose and escaped. Gun and all—I couldn't stop to get rid of it. Had to pack it half way to the Line." He stretched himself again and left the scars on his wrists where the

shackles had bit to the bone.

"And every time I'd stop to rest I'd hammer these nippers with a

rock."

He laughed and Johnny laughed with him.

"I should have gone with you," he said.

"My fault—I should have asked you," came back Mark. "Right at the start I got off wrong, and every man except me was killed. They were a fine bunch of boys, but the leadership was bad. I was so damned mad at Salome I lost my judgment. But never mind, old top, it's all right."

He took Johnny's hand again, and Kew could feel Salome's eyes hot upon him. But he had won his pardner back.

"How are you fixed for money?" he inquired, and Mark glanced across at Salome, who had signaled that there was no beer. Now she signaled back that they were out of everything.

"Not a dollar," he answered truthfully, "and no way to get one."

"Then I came just in time," observed Kew. But as he began to unbuckle his money-belt Barr jogged him with his elbow.

"How about this," he inquired, "that the Chula Vista bar-keep gave us?"

"Lemme see that!" commanded Mark, as Barr produced the bag, but he shoved it back contemptuously.

"Never had it in my life," he said. "Never gave any money to a barkeep."

"Well, now here," reasoned Bear Paw. "What the hell do you care? Are you going to look a gift-horse in the mouth? We brought this money to give to Salome, so she could take better care of the kid."

"Don't want it," declared Trumbull, ungraciously; and turned expectantly to Kew.

"That's right," nodded Johnny, counting out a wad of bills. "What are pardners for--eh, Mark? Any time you need more, just holler. I happen to be in funds, right now."

"O.K.," agreed Trumbull, stowing the money away. "Where'd you get all this money, Mr. Barr?"

He picked up the bag and hefted it negligently.

"W'y-Johnny got it," lied Bear Paw.

"Yeah," spoke up Kew, "dug it up in an old house."

"Brand new!" pronounced Mark, taking out a gold coin. "Well, go on, Mr. Kew-what's the answer?"

"Bunch of train-robbers," shrugged Johnny. "You have to know everything, don't you?"

"What's that?" cried Salome, who had been standing by listening. "Oh, Johnny! Come over here please!"

She threw her arms about his neck and drew his head down close. "Tell me!" she whispered. "Did you kill him?"

"Nope," he answered. "A fellow named Morales."

"Oh-oh!" she cried again, and kissed him ecstatically, "Can you prove it? Legally? Is he dead?"

Johnny reached into his pocket and brought out a ring.

"Recuerdo de Rosario," he quoted. "A present from Mr. Morales."
"What's that?" broke in Mark. "The brother of these two Mexicans
that are buried down by the gate?"

"Yes," smiled Kew. "And they were so grateful for my assistance that they gave me this-and this."

He touched the money-bag lightly and Trumbull understood.

"Well, in that case," he said, "I reckon I can keep it."

"Yes," nodded Bear Paw. "Kind of a dowry, when ye get married. Isn't it strange how things work around?"

"Sure is!" agreed Mark; and Salome leapt at him.

"Oh, will you?" she beamed. "For him?" She glanced towards the cradle and Trumbull grinned,

"All right," he said, "you win!"

Chapter XXXVI

VENING was coming on and, under his brush remada, Barr surveyed Animas Valley like a king. His enemies were all dead, the rustlers were gone; and, down below him, his Mexicans were singing. All was well in their little world, the Boss was back on his lookout, and they were sweeping the tamped ground for a dance.

"Isn't it wonderful," he observed as he watched his cattle drifting in and heard the malacate hoisting up water, "isn't it wonderful how everything has worked out! I do believe, Johnny, you brought the luck with you when you staggered in across that flat. And now that old Mark has come back to life and has got to lay low for a while, I'll stake him to a bunch of cattle and let him fight the other rustlers off. There'll always be rustlers up that canyon, so why not have a good one?"

"Suits me," responded Kew. "And there'll always be Snookums to kind of tame him down. But that woman—"

"He's got her number," said Barr.

"But God, how she hates me!" sighed Johnny.

"That's all right," defended Bear Paw. "Keep her that way. She's got a man now that can make her toe the line. No more rough-housing poor old Johnny. There's only one way to handle a woman like that, and Mark has showed her he's the boss."

"Well," observed Kew, "he's got to be fighting somebody—and you can say the same for her. So—"

"You've said it," declared Barr. "It's an ideal marriage. They couldn't be happy without somebody to scrap with. But that kid—ain't he a dandy?"

"He's going to grow up just like his father," smiled Kew, "And Mark is quite a man."

"He is-muy hombre!" agreed Bear Paw; and sank into contemplative silence.

The sun sank in glory behind the western mountains and the *gente* came out to dance. Nestor approached and doffed his sombrero to the man he worshipped like a god.

"With permission, may we ask you to open the dance for us?"

"With much pleasure," responded Don Carlos politely, and so Johnny was left alone. But not for long, for as he sat there thinking Dolores appeared out of the darkness and climbed up into his lap.

"Where have you been all day?" she asked. "Did you see Snookums, up the canyon? Oh, isn't he the darlingest little boy! Do you think she will ever bring him back?"

"No," he answered. "Salome does not like us."

"But you like her—don't you, Johnny? Papá said he saw you kissing her."

"Your papa talks too much," he said. "He is a very nice man and my very good friend, but I repeat—he talks too much."

"But didn't you kiss her, Johnny? Oh, she looks so pretty and wears such beautiful clothes—"

"But clothes are not everything," he reminded her. "There is such a thing as character, Dolores—you'll learn all about that later, It is what makes you honest and good, and loyal to your friends—and I couldn't say all that for Salome."

"Then you don't love her?" she clamored. "You went right up there as soon as you got home and—"

"Listen, Little One," he said, drawing her closer, "do you want to hear a secret? And will you promise not to tell anyone? Mark Trumbull is back—he didn't get killed at all—and he and Salome are going to get married. Then Snookums will have a new father."

"But-isn't Mr. Lockhart his father?"

"No, Mr. Lockhart is dead. He had an accident, down in Mexico. So Salome can marry Mark."

"But didn't you love her, Mr. Kew, when you kissed her, that time? Engracia thought—"

"I was sorry for her, that was all. I had just told her that Mark was dead—and that was why I kissed her."

Johnny was beginning to sweat; but, after thinking it over, Dolores looked up and smiled.

"Do-do you love me?" she asked at last.

"Yes, Little One," he said, and kissed her.

"And Engracia? You love her, too?"

"Yes indeed!" he answered; and she was still thinking that over

when her father came up the hill.
"Come on, now!" he said, reaching out his big paw, "don't you love

"Come on, now!" he said, reaching out his big paw, "don't you love your papacito any more?"

"Yes, papá," she answered dutifully; but she turned to gaze at Johnny as she trotted back into the house.

He was alone then, looking down at the people dancing, the glare of the big fire-box, the bull-hide bucket rising up out of the depths and splashing its load into the tank. But once more, out of the darkness, he saw a form approaching and this time it was Engracia, herself. He could not see her face but he knew she had forgiven him. Dolores had told her about Mark and Salome and she was coming to make up again.

She sat down shyly on the far end of the bench—gazing down at the fire, the merry couples dancing—and then she moved up closer. He reached out his hand and she took it tenderly, caressing the scars where the bandits had once hurt it, feeling for the wound on his head.

"My Juanito!" she sighed; and smoothed back his tumbled hair, to make him look more like the Christ-picture.

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